Kino no Tabi Volume7

source : https://www.baka-tsuki.org/project/index.php?title=Kino_no_Tabi:Volume7

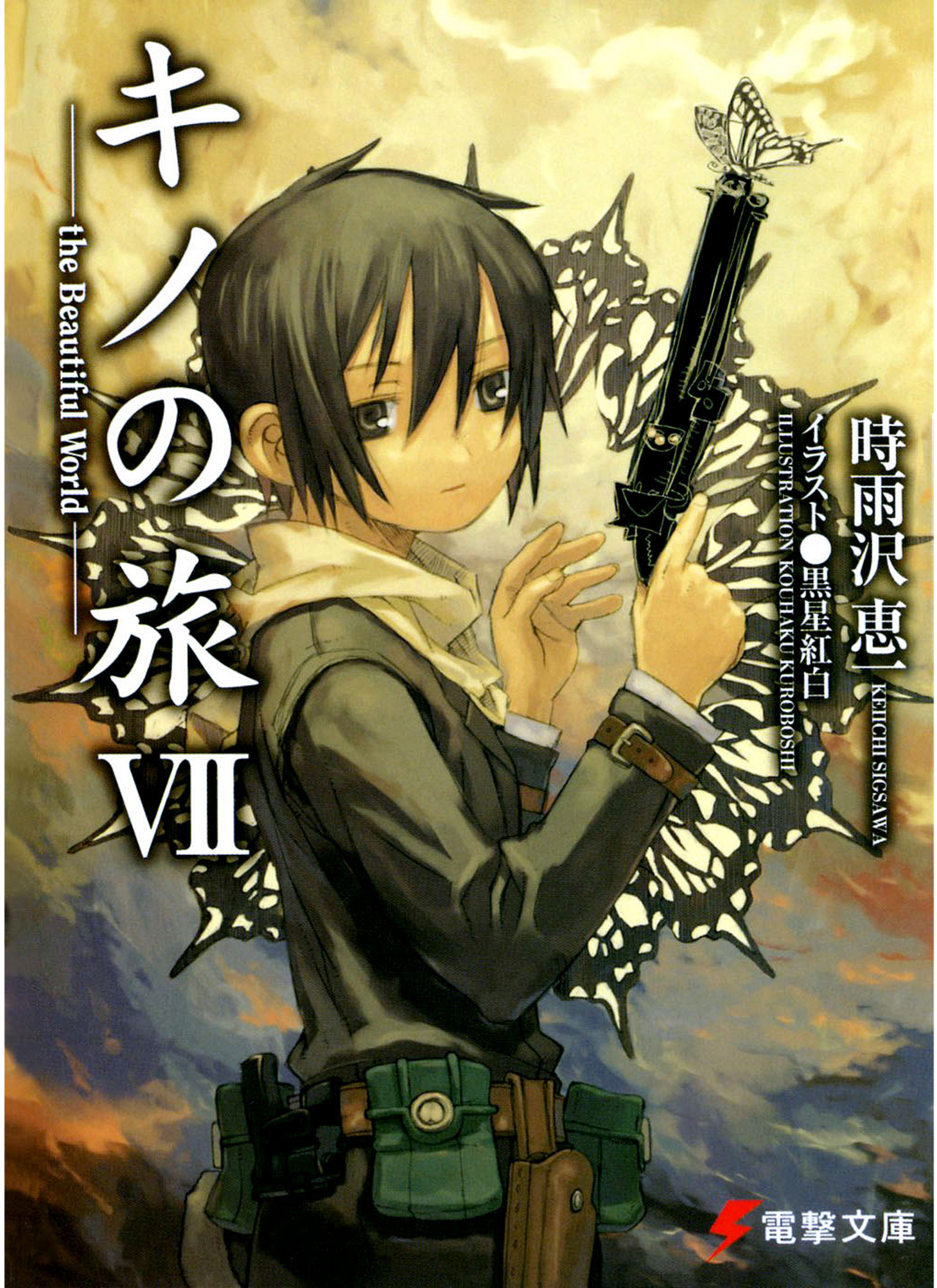
These are the novel illustrations that were included in volume 7

キノの旅(たび)Ⅶ

the Beautiful World

———モトラド（注・二輪車。空を飛ばないものだけを指す）の反対側で、運転手が草の上に座っていた。両足を前に出して、後ろに手をついて、そして空を見上げていた。春の暖かい太陽に、蒼い空を背景にいくつかの雲が流れていく。運転手は十代中頃で、短い黒髪に精悍な顔を持つ。黒いジャケットを着て、腰を太いベルトで締めていた。———人間キノとモトラドのエルメスは“動いている国”に出会い入国する。その“動いている国”が進む先には“道をふさいでいる国”があった（「迷惑な国」）。他全８話収録。

短編連作の形で綴られる、新感覚ノベル第７弾。



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（五歳の筆者・軽井沢にて）

（筆者の母撮影）

しぐさわけいいち
時雨沢恵一

1972年に生まれたと思う。2000年に電撃文庫でデビューしたと思う。2003年の今、それなりに仕事頑張っていると思う。嬉しいと思う。もっと行こうと思う。何処に行くのかと思う。何処に行けるのかと思う。何処に行ったとしても、私はそこにいると思う。

【電撃文庫作品】

キノの旅　the Beautiful World
キノの旅 II　the Beautiful World
キノの旅 III　the Beautiful World
キノの旅 IV　the Beautiful World
キノの旅 V　the Beautiful World
キノの旅 VI　the Beautiful World
キノの旅 VII　the Beautiful World

アリソン
アリソン II　真昼の夜の夢

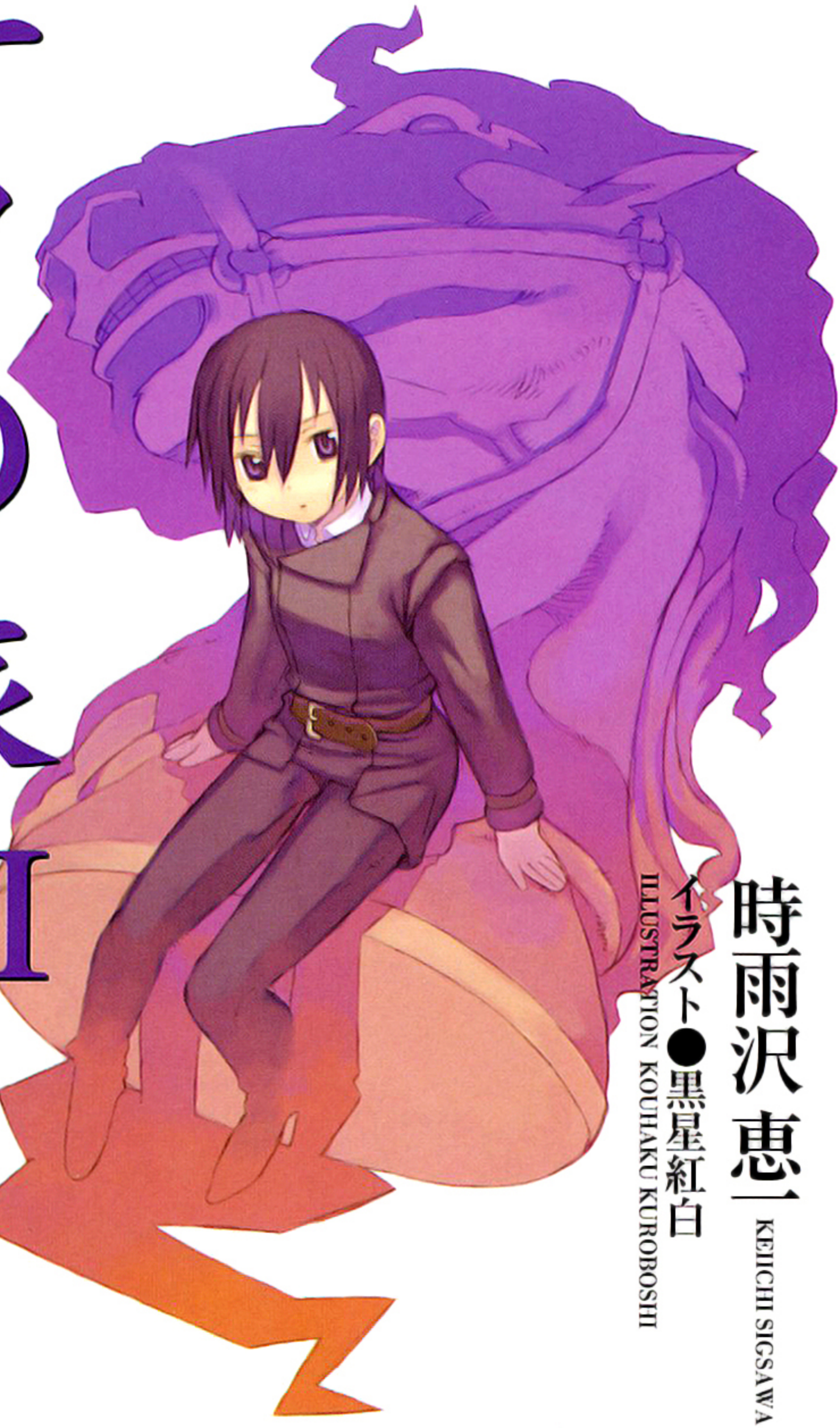
くろぼしこうはく
イラスト：黒星紅白

1974年生まれ。性別：男。九州在住。プレイステーションソフト「サモンナイト」のキャラクターデザインを手がける。フリーでも色々やっています。趣味：プラモデル買い、釣り。

カバー／旭印刷

キノの旅 VII

— the Beautiful World —



時雨沢 恵一

KEIICHI SIGSAWA

イラスト●黒星紅白

ILLUSTRATION KOUHAKU KUROBOSHI

生きていると　悲しい
生きていることは　悲しくない
— I am alive. —

Living is sad
Being alive is not

— I am alive. —

キノの旅 VII

— the Beautiful World —

My encounter with a traveler named Kino
happened while I was still living in my country of birth,
when I was only eleven years old.

The truth is I no longer remember what they called me back then.

I could only faintly recall that it was the name of some flower,
and that if you change its pronunciation a little,
it turns into a nasty insult.

That's because I was often teased with it.

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カバー・口絵・本文デザイン／鎌部善彦

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Chapter Five "A Tale of a Tea Party in a Forest" — Thank You —

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Epilogue "To Do Something · a" — life goes on. · a —

Afterword in Color — Preface —

Hello everyone. Is this the author Keiichi Sigsawa? (Editor's Note: Why are you asking?)

So far, I have written different kinds of afterwords, but this is my first time writing an afterword in color. In other words, it is 'a new age for afterwords'. The *new generation*. *The* evolution —— It is not exaggeration to say that I persistently and desperately wrote the novel text all for the sake of bringing forth this renewed afterword —— Yes! That is to say, the main text was nothing but a chunk of characters written to make the afterword stand out. (Editor's Note: We have to talk later.)

Now then, after this book's publication on June 2003 AD, the first DVD volume of the anime which is currently being broadcasted, as well as the game must hit the shelves soon. That my debut work, 'Kino no Tabi' continues to receive love even after crossing genres, is something that really makes me happy from the bottom of my heart.

It was roughly ten years ago since I first came up with

the final speech of the curator in the 'Peaceful Country' for the sample first volume. Sigsawa was still a student at the time.

Back then, I was still practicing typing; writing my diary every day with a word processor (by the way, I still do this even now). One day, I came up with 'a collection of questions to ask myself ten years later'. I could still clearly remember the ambience in my dormitory room and my feelings as I tried to write something that I came up with out of the blue, out of my desire to play around.

The questions begin with 'Are you still alive?' (Ans. Somewhat), 'Are you healthy?' (Ans. Fairly well), 'Have you graduated from university?' (Ans. Miraculously), ' Did you go out with her?' (Ans. Leave me alone!), and so on —— Out of these was this question:

"Did your dream come true?"

—

Ten years from now. I would answer the questionnaire I borrowed from the last part of my afterword to my 2013 self.

"Yes, my dream ten years ago has come true. I have become the light novel author that I aspired to be back then, admired by many people. I am happy. —— And, how are you right now? The dreams you had back in 2003, have they come true?"

—

Editor: Oh? Then what's your dream right now, Sigsawa?

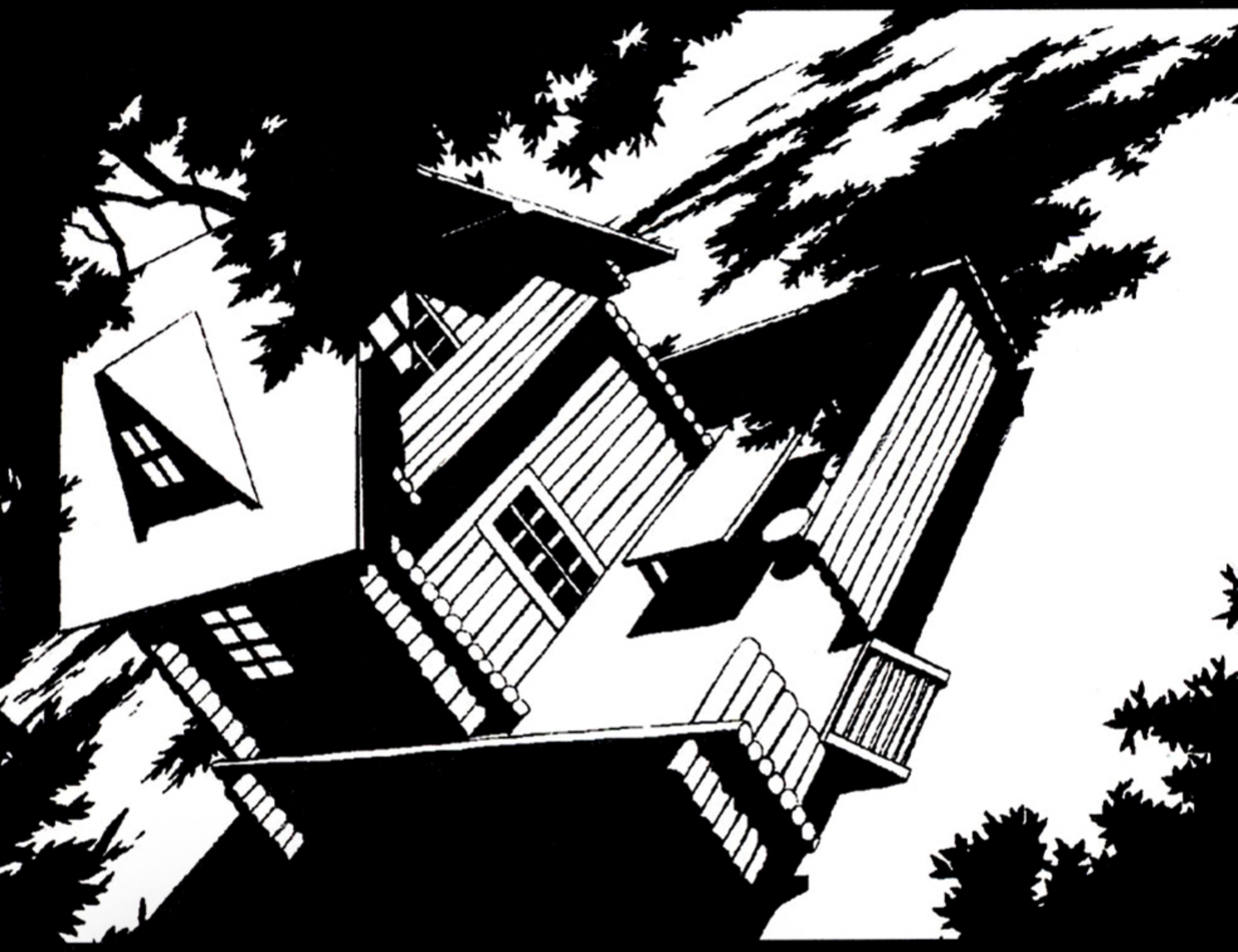
Sigsawa: (Absentmindedly) To make an afterword anime…

Editor: It looks like I have to talk with you after all… (* smack*)

Sigsawa: Wha—. What are you doing—. Stop—. Let go —. I'm Sigsawa, you know—. (*Voice fades out *) Now, here's the main text—

June 2003
Keiichi Sigsawa

“To Do Something · b” —life goes on. b—



Prologue

“To Do Something · b”

— life goes on. · b —

"Welcome back, Kino," said the old woman standing in front of the small log house in the middle of the forest.

Right in front of her eyes, Kino stopped Hermes' engine. She propped Hermes on his center stand and threw open her coat that was fastened tightly because of the wind.

"I thought… that you might not return. Glad to see you back."

Kino walked toward the old woman and said:

"I'm back.——Master."

The west part of the bright evening sky was dyed a crimson color, while the east was of a deep blue. The two stood on the terrace in front of the house and gazed at the sky spread above the forest.

None of them spoke; the time just slowly passed. As if remembering something, Kino took off her hat and goggles.

"Kino, you've shortened your hair?" said the old woman.

Kino lightly brushed her hair that looked uncombed.

"Yes. I like it."

"Good. I like it too."

"Me too—," said Hermes from the bottom of the terrace.

Kino reached out to the holster hanging on her right thigh and took out a persuader. Holding it by the barrel, she passed it to the old woman.

"Thank you for this."

The old woman slowly took it and checked that there were five bullets loaded in it.

"You're welcome."

The old woman casually, as if naturally, thrust it behind her belt.

"Have you done what you needed to do?" the old woman asked Kino with a light smile.

"Yes," Kino answered shortly.

“But, what am I supposed to do from now on? —— What should I do?”

The old woman answered:

“You should think about it and decide for yourself.”

For a while Kino just stood there thinking. After some time, she turned her head to the old woman.

“Master… I would like to become stronger.”

“That’s good. I can teach you various things. Would you like to?”

“Yes, please. And——”

“What?”

“I want to hear about your journey again. Please, tell me more.”

The old woman nodded several times.

“Alright—— You really like these stories, don’t you? Have I told you about an elder in some mountain country, who became tired of his job and ran away[1]?”

Kino shook her head.

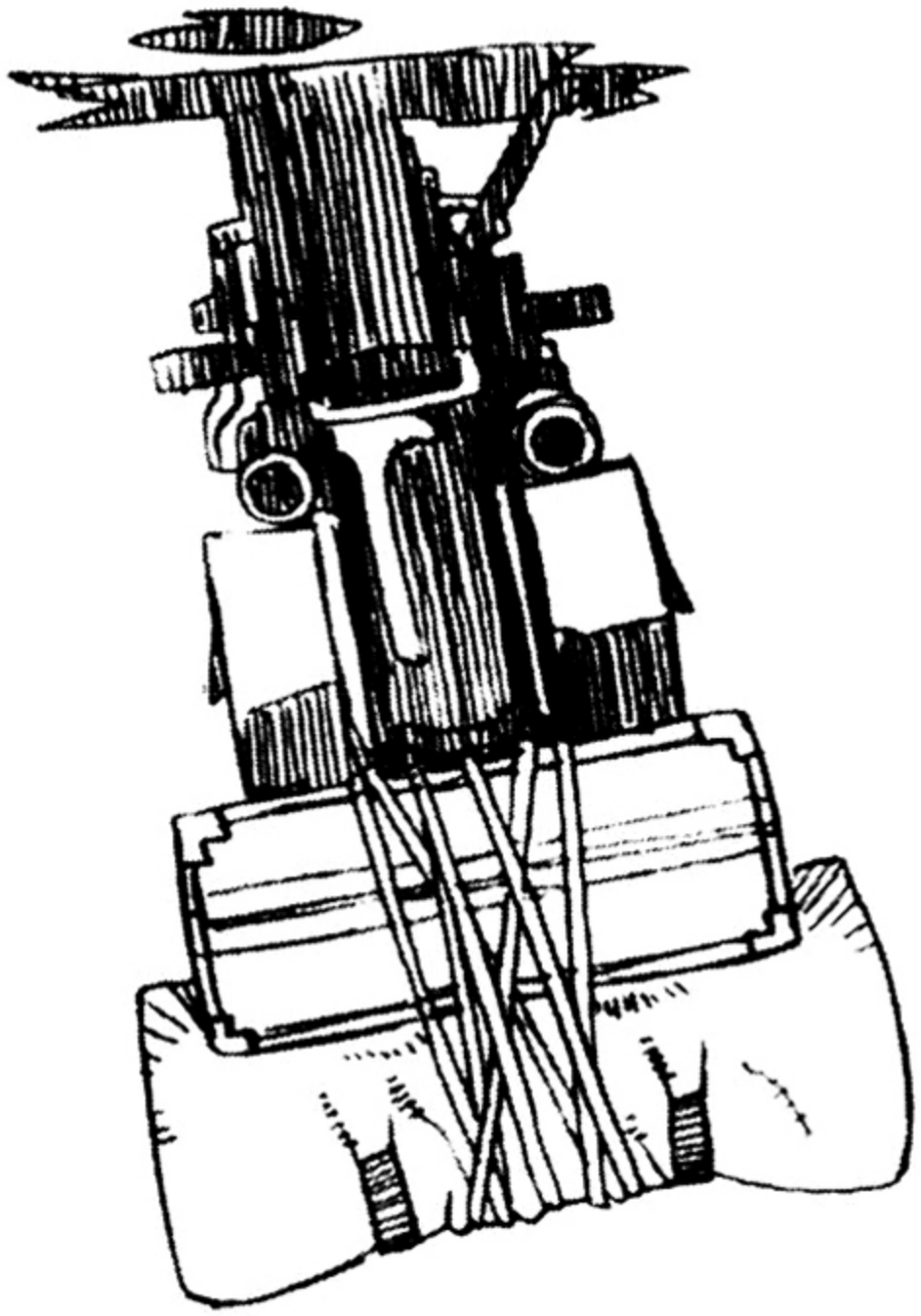
"In that case——" Saying this, the old woman headed to the house.

"I haven't heard this one yet, so please——" Kino also entered the house.

Hermes watched silently as the two left.

When they entered the house and completely disappeared, he exclaimed:

"Eh? What…? Wait, what about me?!"



“A Troublesome Land” —Leave Only Footsteps!—

Chapter One

"A Troublesome Land"

— Leave Only Footsteps! —

A motorrad (Note: A two-wheeled vehicle. Only to note that it cannot fly) was parked beside a stream. The motorrad, piled with traveling luggage on top and on both sides of its rear wheel, was propped on its center stand.

It was a small stream, narrow enough for a child to jump across. It created a slight depression on the flat earth.

It was a meadow flanked by mountains.

On the north and south sides were bare and scraggy mountain ranges, meandering alongside each other. There were small patches of white snow left on their peaks.

A wide and flat terrain was interposed between these mountain ranges. The stretch of green cover produced by various trees and grass occurred along with the grayish color of the mountains.

The rider was sitting on the grass opposite the motorrad. Both legs placed in front, hands stretched out

behind, her eyes were looking up at the sky — to the warm spring sun and numerous clouds flowing on a backdrop of blue sky.

The rider was around her mid-teens. She had short black hair and a fearless expression on her face. She was wearing a black jacket fastened with a wide belt on the waist. On her right thigh was a holster for a revolver-type hand persuader (Note: A persuader is a gun. In this case, a pistol). Behind her waist, there was another one — an automatic-type.

"What a pain…," the rider said, lowering her gaze.

"Well what now, Kino? Have you come up with anything?" The motorrad from behind asked. The rider called Kino shook her head and answered.

"Nope —— none at all."

"That won't do," the motorrad said.

Kino stood up, a somewhat disappointed look lingering on her face. Some blades of grass fell down as she lightly brushed off her bottom.

"I suppose so, Hermes. But for the meantime…," Kino said as she approached the motorrad called Hermes, opening the box on one side of his rear wheel. She took out something that resembled a ball of long, coiled rope.

"What are you going to do?" Hermes asked. Kino lightly wore the hat placed on top of the carrier and moved towards the two nearest trees.

"Until I have thought of a good idea——"

"Until then?"

"I'll sleep."

"Huh?"

Kino uncoiled the ball of rope she was carrying. It was a simple net hammock made from rope. She skillfully tied it on the branches of the two trees and let it hang in the air. Then she removed the holstered persuader behind her waist.

"……"

Kino looked at it in silence for a while. The square-barreled persuader was almost bare though it was installed in its holster. Kino called this 'Woodsman'.

She then placed Woodsman along with its holster in the belt in front of her stomach.

"The weather is warm and great. It's perfect for an afternoon nap."

Kino sat at the center of the hammock, placed her legs and upper body in it, and lay down, careful not to tip over. The hammock swayed a little and eventually settled down.

"I'll be counting on you," Kino instructed Hermes and placed her hat on top of her forehead.

"Good grief. What to do now?" Hermes mumbled and sighed while looking at Kino, who soon fell asleep.

A small puddle of stagnant water formed in one part of the stream. The blue sky was reflected a little at its center.

The water quietly trembled. Tiny ripples were born, gathering at the center of the puddle. The blue sky in it quivered.

"Kino!" Hermes shouted. Kino's body slipped from the hammock, but she used her hands to fall in a safe position and lay on top of the grass. Her hat fell by her side.

"What is it?" Kino asked Hermes in a soft voice while she lay down, quickly surveying her surroundings. Hermes spoke with his usual tone,

"The ground. It's shaking isn't it?"

"The ground?" Kino seemed doubtful and was silent for a few seconds, and then she tilted her head.

"Maybe I don't feel it yet," Kino picked up her hat and stood up. Dust and leaves lightly fell from her body. With her right hand on her waist persuader, she asked Hermes, "An earthquake, perhaps?"

"No. The tremors are really weak, but gets stronger little by little."

"Then…" Kino tilted her head.

"It's simple. This means that something is slowly approaching," Hermes said nonchalantly. Kino looked sideways to the east and to the west, and only saw the unchanging scenery.

"What do you mean by … 'something'?" Kino asked.

"I don't know," Hermes answered.

After a while, the answer to this question came.

"It does shake. Even I can see it clearly now," Kino said while looking at the ripples on the puddle.

As Kino spoke, Hermes called out to her and urged her to look at the forest in the eastern side.

Kino turned around and stood up. Then they saw ‘it’.

—

‘It’ was a country.

Like any other country, this one was surrounded by round and tall gray walls. Other than the wall not having seams on its material, there was nothing strange about its appearance.

Except that this country…

“It’s coming towards us.”

…was moving.

Kino stared, stupefied, at the country that suddenly appeared amidst the scenery in the east.

Beyond the trees, the top of the walls went in and out of view. It was slowly but steadily drawing near. In other words, it was going towards Kino's direction. The tremors were becoming stronger.

"The mystery's solved," Hermes said.

"No doubt… Well, what is that thing?" Kino asked, her eyes wide open.

"A country, isn't it obvious?" Hermes answered, not sounding the least bit shocked. "If you keep on daydreaming, you'll get run over."

"I suppose you're right."

The moving country proceeded straight ahead. A low rumble like the howling of wind could be heard. Kino hurriedly removed the hammock, rolled it up and put it away in the luggage box. She put on her hat, strapped on her goggles, went astride Hermes, and started the engine.

Kino launched Hermes. She rode through the meadows and tried to go around to the right of the advancing country. She stopped just beside the anticipated route of the country.

Kino observed the country, which has gotten much closer.

It was surrounded by circular walls and had a guard post just like any other country. It was not so big; one can probably go across it in one leisurely afternoon walk. But this country was moving. It approached Kino and Hermes with a low rumble reminiscent of distant thunder.

Kino, whose angle of view was gradually getting higher, spoke with a slightly loud voice, "Amazing… the country is moving. It's my first time to see something like this."

"Same here," Hermes agreed and added, "What are we going to do, Kino? Are you giving it a thumbs-up?"

Kino looked at Hermes. "That may be a good idea…"

"But, you can get attacked all of a sudden."

"It's a gamble, huh…? Well, a gamble it is. I wasn't able to come up with anything anyway."

And so Kino revealed herself a little from the shadow of a shaking tree and waved her hands, trying to get the country’s attention.

The moving country approached even more, mowing down the trees in its path.

Underneath the walls was a thick foundation. Further below were things that looked like gigantic caterpillars, as wide as a house, and installed with countless centipede legs. The legs tread on the ground and slowly turned. The upturned tree trunks rolled beneath the caterpillar, getting pulverized in the process.

The moving country obstructed the sky. The spring sun that was slightly inclined to the north was hidden from view, and Kino was covered in shadow.

“It’s like seeing a mountain move,” Hermes muttered.

Amidst the increasing noise and tremors,

“Are you a traveler?” a man’s voice reached Kino and Hermes. It sounded as if it came from somewhere nearby , so Kino looked around her in surprise.

"Oh, I'm speaking from inside the country. It's just that you can hear it as if it's coming from nearby. —— If you're a traveler, do you want to enter the country?"

Kino waved her hands once more.

"Okay, then please wait for a while."

So said the voice. The noise and tremors quietened for a while. Kino and Hermes looked ahead, and one last loud noise was heard before the country came to a stop.

—

Kino and Hermes were in front of a door. The gate, which served as the entrance to the country, opened before them and became a slope. Because it was thick and massive, the top of the door sank into the ground. Beyond it was a passage; a hill road climbing into the country.

A small car appeared, descending the hill road. It ran accompanied only with the gentle hum of its motor, with

a lone man riding inside. He was wearing a white shirt and necktie with a light green work jacket on top. The man in his forties looked like a good-natured person in all respects.

"Hello, traveler. I am this country's immigration inspector. I am also the tour guide, police officer, and so on. In our country, government workers are given a variety of posts, you see," the man said as he stopped the car in front of Kino and Hermes. Kino and Hermes introduced themselves as travelers.

"Um, is this thing… a country after all? Where is it headed?" Kino asked, and the guide nodded.

"Yes, indeed. Inside, my brethren are living in peace. We are constantly migrating. Right now, we are going along these plains towards the west."

As usual, Kino asked for permission to stay in the country for rest and recreation.

The guide readily consented, saying that guests are always welcome to their country.

"Well, how many days are you planning to stay with us?"

Kino dropped Hermes a glance and then faced the guide.

“We would like to stay for five to ten days.”

—

“And that over there is the nuclear power reactor. The large quantity of steam the reactor produces moves the generator, and the electric power generated moves the country and also serves as our energy supply.”

The guide said, pointing towards the enormous equipment beyond a thick glass pane. Kino was seated in the passenger seat while Hermes was riding on the car’s loading platform. The car was parked on a wide road, surrounded with a glass-walled interior. The minute vibrations accompanied with low hums continued.

The guide pointed to a group of monitors installed above the glass panes. Shown in the monitors were people working beside the gigantic equipment, completely covered with full-body clothing.

“That machine works on its own, and the people here have almost nothing left to do. We only have to observe. The fuel placed in this container is guaranteed to last for several hundred years, so we don’t even need spares. The important thing is to maintain and clean the caterpillars and the engines. Now, let’s proceed.”

The car moved quietly. While they were riding, Kino spoke. “Since when did everyone start living here?”

“You’re asking for the country’s history, eh? The truth is we don’t fully understand as well. As to whether someone found this migration apparatus and chose to live here instead of in a country, or whether our ancestors lived in it since ages past; we could no longer remember. It’s a mystery, but we really don’t mind not knowing about it.”

"Do you really have to move around all the time? Can't you settle down once you found some good land?" Hermes asked. The guide gave him two reasons as to why they should be constantly on the move.

"First, there's the question of the nuclear power reactor. Once stopped, restarting it will take some time. If we stop moving for a long amount of time, the excess amount of temperature and energy will accumulate. To protect ourselves against this, we spend the energy by making the caterpillar be constantly on the move. For instance, letting it move at about the speed of a walking person."

"I see,"

"Uh-huh,"

Kino and Hermes interjected. The guide gave a merry laugh.

"The other reason is the same as a traveler's —— to see a variety of sceneries; sceneries that change. We have grown fond of this, so we continue to migrate. In other words, all of our citizens are travelers."

"I see… that's a good thing. Is your route decided?"

"No. We continue to roam around this enormous continent. Occasionally, we would be on a desert or a prairie, and at times, we would be running along a dangerous slope, prepared for the inconvenience it will give us. We rarely come across the same place twice, and even if we did, it will probably not be within anyone's lifetime. We will probably never settle in a single place for eternity."

—

The car carrying Kino and Hermes went along the path inside the country. The car rode towards the country's center on a road that was only wide enough to allow two vehicles to pass each other. There were intersections and traffic lights here and there.

The car ascended a switchback hill road. After this climb, the square light of the exit could be seen just straight ahead. The car came out and the sky was revealed.

It was the country's top floor. Underneath the blue sky was a green space encircled by low walls. It was a huge park, complete with soil, grass lawns, and forests. Some of the trees were so large that their ages must easily exceed a hundred years. There was even a river and a small lake.

Like any other park, this one was filled with people strolling, exercising, or taking an afternoon nap on the lawn, or enjoying a boat ride in the lake.

"This top floor is the only place where we can enjoy the sunlight. It has become the residents' place for relaxation. It's like our courtyard. To be fair to everyone, all of us, including our president, live in the lower floors. However, the president lives by the side where there is a view of the streets."

"I see."

The car then followed the hill road and climbed to a road leading to the top of the wall. As it is, the top of the wall served as a road. It was rather narrow, bordered left and right with nothing but sturdy yet low railings. From the left side, the country's greenery, and from the right, the earth's greenery could be seen way, way below.

"You'd better not look if you're afraid of heights," Hermes said.

When the car exited to the eastern walls, that is, opposite to where the country is headed,

"Wow!"

"Amazing!"

Kino and Hermes raised their voices in awe. On the ground at the eastern side were traces of the country's movement.

The enormous caterpillars dug out the ground, treading on and crushing each tree and flowering plant underneath, exposing the bare earth. The wide brown line between the mountain ranges stretched, and faded until it can no longer be seen.

"I suppose this much is expected," the guide said with a rather bitter look on his face.

"It really pains me that we had to leave such enormous traces on the face of Mother Nature for the sake of our enjoyment. I'm sure it's a nuisance. But if man were to

walk, he had to leave footprints. We have come to the conclusion that this much is inevitable, and I only wish that strong, new blooms be born over this earth once more.”

—

It was a small but clean room.

There was a bed, a western-style dresser which now displayed Kino’s coat, a folding chair and desk. Everything was fixed securely.

There were no windows in the room; it was completely enclosed with walls. In one wall, a big monitor was installed. Half of it displayed the morning scenery, and the other half displayed darkness, indicating the current time of the day.

Hermes was parked right beside the entrance, occupying half of the free space. He was propped on his side stand and fixed with a belt so he would not fall. There was not a single speck of dust in the room.

Kino came out of a door beside the room. She was wearing a pair of blue pajamas with ‘Room No. 41’ printed above the chest. She briskly wiped her wet hair with a towel, hung it on her neck, and sat on the bed.

Kino spoke. “Without a doubt, this is the first time I’ve seen a country with so much hot water I can use.”

“Since that water is being recycled, I bet it will end up as your drinking water tomorrow,” Hermes teased.

“I couldn’t care less. It’s still better than drinking muddy river water filtered with a cloth.”

“I guess so. By the way, what’s up with those pajamas? ”

“They’re for guests. I went ahead and borrowed one. There were also lots of towels.”

Just as Hermes interjected, the room shook as if there was a weak earthquake.

“I wonder if it can climb over rocks, too. —— Ah, it stopped. Do you think it’s broken?”

"It only moves this much. Amazing, huh?"

Kino hung the towel on the wall and took out Woodsman hidden underneath her pillow. She extracted it once from its holster and looked at it. Then she put it back to its hiding place.

"Do you think things would work out?"

"Who knows? We'll know in four or five days. —— I' m going to sleep."

Kino rolled on the bed and wrapped herself with the thin blanket.

"Oh, Kino——"

"Let's leave chatting for tomorrow. Good night," she said to Hermes, and then, "Um…, 'turn off' 'all lights'."

The lights in the room and the monitor turned off.

"A clean bed… white sheets…"

In the darkness, Kino murmured and soon fell asleep.

—

The next morning.

Kino got up and turned on the lights and the monitor. The monitor now displayed the outdoor scenery — the forest and the southern mountain range bathed with the morning glow.

Hermes spoke as she got up from bed, “Good morning , Kino.”

“… That’s rare, Hermes. Good morning.”

Kino headed to the bathroom, Hermes speaking to her back.

“I wasn’t able to say it last night——”

Kino disappeared into the bathroom…

“Wha…!”

… and let out a surprised voice from inside.

"If you sleep without drying your hair completely, it will look terrible the next morning."

—

"What about work?"

"Nothing. 'The machine already works wonderfully by itself, and even if there's any work, we wouldn't let a guest do it,' he said a little angrily, and added, 'More than that, you should go sightseeing or relaxing.'"

Kino and Hermes stood idly under the blue sky. Kino pushed Hermes until the entrance to the park and propped him on his stand. Kino was clad in her jacket, but she was not wearing her hat or goggles. She also removed her persuaders along with their holsters.

"It's so comfortable, isn't it? Don't you feel like taking an afternoon nap?" asked Hermes, who was not loaded with luggage today.

"That may be a good idea."

Kino pushed Hermes and entered the park.

The sunbathing residents talked to Kino when they saw her. Everyone heard of Kino and Hermes’ arrival in the news last night. They thanked her for coming, and admired her for being able to travel alone on a single vehicle.

Kino borrowed a deck chair and spent time leisurely looking at the sky. At lunchtime, she climbed up to the marketplace at the center of the park and heartily ate lunch made from farm-grown vegetables and chicken.

After lunch, Kino observed a group of ten-year-olds assembled at the entrance to the park. Tens of children gathered, carrying toolboxes with them. They were led to the inside of the walls.

She asked a nearby resident what it was about.

“Oh, they will be creating a mural as commemoration for this year’s group of graduating schoolchildren.”

“A mural?”

"That's right. Everyone will paint a big picture while riding a gondola suspended from the wall."

Then the resident urged her to see it, as it was supposedly an interesting sight.

"What are we going to do, Kino?"

"We're free anyway and I'm interested."

"Okay. If we're going to ride on top of the walls, we don't have to ride on a car."

Kino started Hermes' engine and climbed the hill road towards the road on top of the wall. The wind was rather strong.

A large crane vehicle was parked on the north side of the wall. With two cranes, an oblong gondola could be lowered along the guide rails stuck on the wall. Beside it, the children were lined up, wearing helmet and lifelines, happily yet somewhat nervously receiving their instructions.

Kino asked the teachers permission to observe, and stopped Hermes as much as she can at the edge of the

road. So that he wouldn’t fall, Kino tied and fixed him on the railings, and tied the lifeline she borrowed beside it.

The children rode the gondola, and it was slowly lowered down. They started to daub paint on the gray walls with big brushes. They carefully traced after a draft that was already drawn on the wall.

“I can’t see what they’re drawing from here.”

And so, the teachers showed Kino and Hermes a monitor. The image painted was a huge snow-peaked mountain range with a tropical rainforest and a group of wild animals before it. It was a huge picture; one would wonder whether the animals were drawn life-size. It was almost complete. Only a small draft drawn at the bottom was left.

“After discussing among themselves, all of the pupils will draw the scene that left them the deepest impression . This scene was a land we passed by four years ago. It was a really beautiful and memorable place. Everyone would climb up the walls and gaze tirelessly at it. It will be completed in a few days. By the way, when I was a child, we painted the picture of a huge crater we found in the wilderness.”

“What are you going to do with this picture after its completion?”

“First we will take a picture, and then we will varnish it. It will adorn the wall for five hundred days — until the graduation of the next batch of students.”

“I see.”

Kino leisurely sat across Hermes and watched the picture being drawn.

—

It soon became dark, and the evening sun set in the direction they were headed.

Kino and Hermes viewed the sun setting between the mountain ranges through the monitor in their room.

—

The next day, that is, the morning of the third day since they entered the country.

Kino woke up at dawn. The sky reflected in the monitor was dull and slightly cloudy, foretelling the rain that will fall at any time. Hermes seemed like he was enjoying as he changed channels.

[The work on the mural will be postponed for today.]

So said the announcement about the previous day’s mural.

[It seemed that even the traveler was really interested in it.]

“I didn’t notice.”

“Well, well.”

A big, blurry image of Kino and Hermes gazing at the work on the mural was shown.

Kino proceeded with her usual light exercises. Then she practiced with her persuaders and started their maintenance afterwards. She disassembled the revolver ‘ Canon’ and the automatic Woodsman, applied oil, loaded them with bullets, and returned them to their holsters.

Then she took out the disassembled rifle-type persuader tied on the cover of her bag. After the maintenance and operation check of its two parts,

“Are you going to use that?”

“Who knows?” was her answer to Hermes’ question. She carefully wiped the lens of the scope, disassembled it again and returned it to the bag.

After taking a shower, Kino pushed Hermes along and headed to the restaurant. She first went out to the

corridor and out to the streets. On the streets, she exchanged greetings with the people headed towards their workplace.

Upon securing Hermes beside a desk, Kino received her breakfast of vegetables. All the plates were made deeper than usual, and can be screwed into the trays. Moreover, the trays were fixed on the tables.

Having found Kino, the guide who was also the inspector, the police officer, and so on, asked permission to sit in front of Kino. He asked about Kino's impression of the country, to which Kino answered with all honesty. The guide laughed cheerfully.

After finishing her after meal tea, and when Kino was about to stand up, an alarm went off in the dining hall. It was a high-pitched sound painful to the ears. The red light on the wall started to rotate.

"What is it?"

"A fire?"

"Go to your work posts. Don't trip from panic," the police (aka guide, inspector, etc.) ordered the people around him, and then turned to answer Kino and Hermes' questions.

"This alarm means that a nearby country was detected along our route. I will be going to my post as an ambassador…. Do you want to observe?"

—

The alarm changed into slow music, and an announcement instructing the commoners to go to their rooms flowed out.

Riding the man's car, Kino and Hermes arrived in a room with 'Driving Command Post' written on it, and entered. Inside was a space similar to a ship's bridge, with a number of people seated on their seats in front of control boards. In front, several large monitors were lined up.

Among the seated people wearing the same jackets, there was a middle-aged woman sitting in a comfortable chair. She saw the man who was now serving as an ambassador, and spoke to him with a laid-back tone.

"So you've come. We'll be counting on you. —— Oh, miss traveler. Hello there. I am this country's president. Please, enjoy your observation.

Kino returned a bow. She sat in the seat offered to her, and was told to fasten her seatbelt. Hermes was secured beside her.

Kino and Hermes' gaze fell into the group of monitors lined up before them. A number of them were displaying the situation outside the country. There were also some displaying the mural. And at the center, on a big monitor similar to a movie screen, the scenery right ahead was displayed.

Spread below the cloudy sky was the same scenery as two days before, a forest between two mountain ranges. And beyond this forest was a country.

"This again… of all things," the man said in surprise.

"Quite worrying, isn't it?" the president said.

Its wall was made of stones put together. There was nothing unusual about it. However, it was not circular. It stretched across on a straight line — one end extended up to the northern mountain while the other end extended to the south. It was like a dam, completely obstructing the plain.

“It’s a ‘blockade’, huh?” the man said. Slowly, the walls inside the screen became closer.

The monitor zoomed in, and they saw soldiers lining up cannons above the walls in a state of panic. A directing arrow pointed at it on top of the terminal screen . The man took a microphone in his hand. He asked to have a discussion with their representative through the wireless.

Eventually, a radio correspondence mixed with noise began. A man, who claimed to be the general of the other side asked, ‘What in the world are you?!’

“We are a country in constant migration,” the ambassador explained simply. “We have a request of you . Since we are traveling due west, we would like permission to go across your country.”

—

The person on the other end of the line was at a loss for words, and then replied that they could not possibly allow such a thing.

"I knew it," Hermes muttered.

"But you see, your country is completely blocking off the plain with your walls. With that, our country has no place to go through," the man said.

'This is a territory our country expanded into with great effort over a long period of time. A foreign country does not have any right to complain against it. If you get any closer, you will be violating our territorial rights and we will commence attack,' the reply came.

"We have no intention of fighting a pointless war with you. We only want to pass through. Please tell us which part of your country will be all right for us to traverse."

'How can we allow something like that!' the angry reply was heard.

"Prepare the dome. Set up two cameras. One to the rear left, and one within the country," the man gave out instructions to the people sitting before him.

The small monitor displayed the road on top of the wall. Its center split, from which several armored panels resembling fingernails slowly appeared. The panels built a huge dome together with the top of the wall.

'I see. We do not wish to fight a pointless battle either, but if that is your intention, you leave us no choice but to resolve this situation using the military power we have for defending ourselves,' came the response from the wireless. After that, a war was officially proclaimed, and soon, the lined up cannons on the wall spouted flames all at once.

"What a troublesome bunch…," the man muttered, and soon, the monitor reflected the walls and the dome being hit by the shells. It was covered with the explosion's flame and smoke which soon cleared away. The wall as well as the dome was only slightly burned, and no sound or tremor even reached the command post.

Amidst being struck by cannon fire without restraint, the moving country continued to get closer to the walls.

"It's about time. Please prepare the cameras."

At the man's orders, one part of the wall opened, from which two spheres were sent flying out. Like two gigantic soccer balls, the black and white spheres pulled a wire and drew a parabolic trajectory.

One fell inside the forest, while the other one went over the walls of the other country and fell inside. It crushed a wooden hut into pieces, rebounded, and fell on top of a field.

The images captured by the spherical cameras were displayed in the monitor.

The first one reflected the image of the whole country as seen from the rear left as it slowly approached the walls ahead while being bombarded with cannon fire.

The other one displayed the scenes inside the country before them: the interior of the tall walls, the soldiers transporting the cannon shells, the western walls which could be dimly seen from afar. To the north, a town

crowded with stone houses and buildings could be seen. Other than this, almost the whole expanse of the country was comprised of plains and fields.

After a while, a rush of soldiers headed to the camera, attacking it with rifle fire and grenade blasts. As a result, the image flickered and shook.

"Your excellency, it seems that we can pass through the fields. We wouldn't have to stomp on so many houses," the man said to the woman who was leisurely drinking tea in her chair.

"That's great then. Let's do that," the president said without a care. The man pushed the microphone's call button.

"Now then, we will pass through the rural area at the southern side of your country. Since we will increase our speed, I believe it wouldn't take half a day. Please rest assured."

'We won't allow you to do such a thing. Even without our cannons, our staunch walls will protect us,' came the reply. Ignoring this, the man gave out orders to the people seated before him.

"Cut down the walls. There at the left side, at the area where no cannons are lined up would be good."

"Roger," they replied. A ray of light appeared in the monitor. The bright yellow light fired from the moving country and extended straight towards the walls.

"……"

"It's a high-energy laser. It's similar to Woodsman's laser sight," Hermes gave an explanation to Kino who was staring in surprise.

The laser hit, then ran from the top to the bottom of the wall. Then it moved to the left, then upwards. It cut through the stone wall as if it was paper.

'W-what did you just do?!'

At the same time as the general's impatient voice, the cut-off portion of the wall slowly collapsed to the front. During its fall, the stones at the top crumbled down and simultaneously collapsed to the ground like building blocks. Dust fluttered about.

"We have made ourselves a path."

"Then let us pass through."

So went the conversation between the man and the president. The moving country paused once and then started to move to the left. This was captured by the rear left camera. Amidst the tireless attacks of the cannon, the massive country covered with black smoke headed precisely towards the hole that it opened, then began to proceed straight ahead once more.

'What a despicable thing to do! More importantly, if you were to cross our country, shouldn't you pay a price for it?' came the response from the wireless.

"Even if you say that… there's nothing our country can give you. I'm truly sorry. To not cause you further trouble, we will leave immediately," the man answered.

The wires were coiled to retrieve the two cameras, and then the moving country trampled on the mountain of rubble which used to be the wall, and entered the hole it opened for itself. It was only wide enough, without even allowing a single car to fit in the gaps on both sides.

After passing through the walls, the moving country started to traverse the country. The bombardments have stopped, and only the soldiers looking up with dumbstruck faces were displayed in the monitor.

The moving country violently ran through the distinct green line of fields in the spacious country. It dug its caterpillar legs into the ground and slightly increased its speed to that of a running person.

There was a house straight ahead. It was a large house, and on its side was a silo built for storing harvested crops .

“Ah, there’s a house.”

At the same time as the man’s remark, the general’s voice was heard, ‘There’s a house ahead! Stop advancing! ’

“General, it’s really rude of us, but please tell the people in the house to evacuate since it’s dangerous.”

The country did not slow down. A truck arrived beside the house, and soldiers rushed in. They took out several people. Among them, there was an old woman

who refused to get on the truck. She turned to the moving country and shouted something hysterically. She threw stones that didn’t reach their mark, and sat down in protest.

“How troublesome,” the man said towards the awe-inspiring figure of the woman who remained seated in place.

“It’s dangerous. Please move out of the way. You will get run over. Please move.”

The woman did not budge, and the moving country drew nearer. This time, the man directed his words to the soldiers.

“Soldiers over there. It is your duty to protect your citizens. Please help this person.”

Eventually, a number of soldiers carried off the woman to the truck. The truck ran off in a hurry. At the same time, the soldiers fired their persuaders from the windows of the truck.

The moving country trampled on the farm family’s silo , storehouse, main house, garage, and a large tree one after the other. After a while, they passed without a

single jolt. In the rear monitor, the remains of the structures could no longer be distinguished.

"It seems we have passed through without much incident. That's a good thing," the man said as he sat leisurely in his chair and drank the mug of tea handed to him. Kino also accepted hers and drank.

'To destroy the land we are blessed with in such a manner. Do you not consider the trouble, harm, and sorrow you cause the people of countries you step on? Do you not have that minimum consideration a human should be capable of?'

In reaction to the general's words, Hermes asked Kino in a whisper, "They say such a thing, but what do you think?"

"… Let's pretend we didn't hear that," Kino answered.

"I suppose you're right."

When the western wall was already clearly displayed at the center of the monitor, the man relaxing in his chair was called out by the people sitting in front.

“It seems like small missiles are being fired towards the side of the walls to where the mural is located. The Board of Education and the parents are asking us to deal with it.”

“Eh?”

The man got up and looked at the terminal screen. There was a large, damaged portion on the mountain part of the mural located at the wall on the right side. Another monitor reflected small four-wheel drives pulling platforms carrying pairs of small, anti-tank missiles. From there, the missiles, pulling their guide wires and trailed with black smoke, leapt straight towards the mural[2]. After a small explosion, the lower part of the mural was burned off.

“So it was on purpose. What a cruel harassment. The children will be very sad. —— Shall we attack the vehicle with the laser?” the man asked the president. The president pondered for a moment, then asked the man,

"Can't we just destroy their launchers?"

"That will be impossible. It is too strong. What shall we do?"

"We don't want to have any more casualties. We'll just have to explain to the children afterwards," the president said, and the man turned to the front with a disappointed face.

"What about shooting them with a persuader?" Kino asked, and the man turned around.

"You mean sniping? That makes sense, but there is no one in our country who can do such a feat."

"If it's all right with you, allow me to do it," Kino said.

"But it's very dangerous."

"I will be fine as long as I don't get hit by cannons."

"You don't have to go this far, Miss Kino."

"It's my gratitude to you for letting me ride, and also for the sake of the children."

The man and Kino exchanged words. The two were on the road on top of the wall with the mural, within the interior of the dome armor. The car they have ridden up to this place was beside them.

Kino, clad in her black jacket and hat, was carrying the already assembled automatic rifle Flute. She slapped a magazine containing nine rounds inside the rifle, and loaded the first shot.

"It looks like they're yet to attack. The platforms containing the missiles are following the vehicles. It seems like they will have to stop first before attacking."

The man showed Kino the monitor he was holding. The four-wheel drives rode in a queue, lined up horizontally, then stopped. The soldiers rotated each pair of missile launchers on the vehicle platforms to the outside, targeting the mural.

"Please open it," Kino said, and the man pushed a switch on the monitor. A small door made for people to pass through slid open. From there, Kino held Flute between her arms, and crept above the road. The man sent her a lifeline from behind.

A weak wind blew from outside. Kino crawled to the edge of the wall as much as she could, and slowly exposed a bit of Flute's barrel through the gap between the railings.

"Miss Kino. It looks like they're going to fire soon."

The man's voice was heard from behind. Kino remained prostrate, aiming below. Through the scope, she saw a soldier peeking from a launcher placed beside the vehicle. Kino released the safety.

Shrill gunshots were heard in succession.

And at that moment, the soldier at the side of the vehicle took his eyes off the equipment in surprise. The huge lens of the equipment was shot out and destroyed.

Kino destroyed the lined up launchers one after another. However,

“!”

The last one was able to fire missiles before she destroyed it. Along with a black smoke, it drew closer to the mural below her. Kino got up.

She exposed her body in a half-rising posture. The monitor zoomed in on her form carrying Flute. There was no sound, but the tremor from the recoil, as well as the empty cartridges being ejected indicated that Kino was rapid-firing the rifle. And in another monitor, two missiles flying towards the mural exploded in mid-air.

—

Taking a good look from the sky, one would see two walls parallel to each other stretched between two mountains. Within the borders was a country.

Far south from the center populated with many buildings was an expanse of green fields. Over there was a perfectly straight and wide brown line. At its tip was an enormous dome, slowly proceeding ahead.

The western wall was cut down with a laser, and slowly crumbled down.

—

The moving country trampled on the remains of the wall. The man took the microphone.

“We have successfully passed through. We are truly sorry for making such a ruckus.”

‘We demand your apology and remuneration for the walls, houses, vehicles, and fields you destroyed. Our country has every right to ask for this. Cease your movement and respond to our negotiations,’ the general’ s voice was trembling in anger.

"No matter what the reason is, the one who commenced the war earlier was you, and since we haven't lost, we have no reason to give you any compensation. We will probably never come to this land a second time. We do not hold a grudge against you, and wish that many plants will grow once more over this land, and that you spend the rest of your lives in peace. That is all, and goodbye," the man said calmly, and cut off the correspondence.

—

The next day.

That is, the morning of the fourth day since Kino entered the country.

The country, with the rising sun behind them, once more proceeded at a speed of a walking person. The dome could no longer be seen. The mountain range at the southern side was already gone, and an endless prairie continued to the west and south. Thin streaks of clouds were floating high in the clear sky.

"If it only takes that much power, then I suppose it's a simple thing for you to destroy, subjugate, and take control of foreign countries," Kino said. She was wearing her black jacket, hat, and holsters on her right thigh and back. Her goggles were hanging down her neck. Hermes beside her was piled up with all her luggage. They were on the road inside the country.

"Well, it sure looks that way, but——" The guide (aka ambassador, inspector, etc.) said. Behind him was a car.

"We do not wish for such a life. We are still sufficiently happy. It's not like we're starving. If we do that, we would turn the whole world into our enemies — a foolish thing to do. But what you have witnessed yesterday is a rare thing. Not so much as destroying countries, we often tread on streets, demolish dikes, and dig up graves."

"Even so, you would still continue your migration?" Hermes asked, and the man nodded.

"Yes. We have decided that such things are inevitable. No matter what kind of human or country, its existence will bring trouble to other people or countries to some extent."

—

“Thank you for having us. We would have stayed longer, but since it was decided that you will be taking the southern route, it can’t be helped. It’s quite regrettable.”

“There’s one last thing I would like to tell you,” the man began. “Miss Kino. Though it may come off as rude, please allow me to say this. Don’t you want to become a citizen of this country, to stay and travel with us? We would gladly welcome you.”

“It’s a real pity, but we would like to continue traveling on our own,” Kino said decisively. The man, as if he was expecting it, smiled gently.

“I see. Please take care.”

Kino expressed her thanks for the fuel, ammunition, and portable rations. The man conveyed to her the children’s appreciation for what she has done.

An announcement stated that they will be stopping soon. The country stopped moving and the door slowly opened.

Kino once more exchanged words of thanks and parting with the man. Then she descended down the door without starting Hermes' engine. When she has landed on the ground and looked back, the door was already closing, gradually hiding the man's waving figure from view.

Kino started Hermes' engine. Along with its rumble, she slowly began to run westward.

The country moved and turned ninety degrees to the south. When Kino looked back, there, above the slightly damaged mural, the helmet-wearing children were lined up, waving their hands.

A motorrad was running due west on a level prairie.

The boisterous sound of its engine reverberated, scaring away birds.

“It’s been a long time.”

“Yeah. Just as I thought, I still preferred this way.”

Hermes and Kino said.

“That was an interesting country. And such a nuisance , too.”

“Which one are you referring to?” Kino asked with a smile.

“Both of them, I suppose. That ‘blockade country’ obstructed the plains on purpose so that they could extort money and goods from everyone who wanted to go through.”

“It was too high a price. If only they asked for anything other than Woodsman, like labor or something, I would have gladly complied just so I could pass through.”

“I wonder… Right about now, they must be repairing that wall desperately.”

"Maybe," Kino said while laughing, then muttered casually, "I wonder where that country will go to from now on…"

"Who knows? But there's one thing I can say for sure."

"… What?" Kino asked, and Hermes immediately answered.

"For several hundred days, your image posing with a rifle will decorate their mural."

"Isn't that's a bit… embarrassing?"

"A nuisance?" Hermes asked.

"Not to that extent, I suppose," Kino answered.

“A Land with a Certain Love” —Stray King—

Chapter Two

“A Land with a Certain Love”

— Stray King —

It was a large country.

Let alone the opposite sides, even from the royal castle built at its center, the walls surrounding the country could not be seen.

Except for the castle town and the nearby villages east and west of the castle gates, the whole country was an expanse of farmlands and grasslands. Numerous rivers flowed within the country, and there was a large lake located at its southeastern end. Luminous clumps of white clouds lazily drifted in the sky.

"There's no one in this direction either."

"Damn . Where could he be?"

A number of the king's aides were running around the castle corridors, faces blue from distress. They opened doors at random and searched inside.

One person seized a maid and asked her where the king was. The maid, overcome with the person's rough behavior,

"His highness was supposed to meet with some travelers…"

"I already know that! I'm asking where they are right now! He couldn't possibly be abducted by those travelers , could he?"

"No way," said the maid. The aide ignoring her,

"No, it's possible. Those two are suspicious no matter how you looked at them. It must be a piece of cake for them to abduct his highness in exchange for bribes. I can see it in their faces. That's why I was against the idea of letting them enter the castle. Damn! You go look for them too!" the aide said, pointing his finger at the maid. At that moment, she saw three people coming from the other side of the corridor.

One of them is a young man — this country's king. One is a rather short, handsome man with blonde hair and blue-eyes, a traveler. And the last one is a youthful woman with long black hair and wearing a stylish jacket, a traveler.

"What's with the ruckus? It's so noisy," said the king. The maid bowed reverently, and the aide hastily turned around and followed suit.

The king explained that he was drinking tea with the travelers in the courtyard, and added, "I became engrossed with stories from foreign lands. But I was bothered with the all the riot you created just because I was not in my usual room."

"Yes sir. Our sincerest apologies."

"The guests will be leaving after a while. I'll go take a walk around the castle after that, so don't go about looking for me, yelling all over the place."

"Yes sir."

The three walked away, leaving the aide bowing with a loathsome look on his face.

A car passed through the gates of the castle.

It was small, yellow, and quite battered. The car looked as if it's going to break at any moment.

The female traveler was in the driver's seat, while the male traveler was sitting in the passenger seat.

The car was making sputtering and other unpleasant noises as it ran on the stone-paved streets of the town. It continued on with occasional repetitive thumps and thwacks coming from the engine's defective spark plug accompanied with white or black smoke belches.

The man spoke. "Master. Let's have that broken window fixed. If we go buy glass, it won't take long."

The window by the driver's seat was cracked and badly fixed with tape. Its vibration was making an annoying rattling sound.

"One of these days then," the woman said.

The car exited the town and went through a narrow road between the fields. Nobody noticed them except for people doing farm work from afar.

"Your highness, is this really okay with you?" the man asked all of a sudden.

The king was tucked in at the bottom of the luggage in the narrow back seat. Still in his very unique position, the king answered with a smile,

"It's fine. This country's lord is nothing but decoration. We were deprived of all power during my great-grandfather's time. Most of the citizens don't even know my face. That's why none of the citizens would worry even if I disappear. The ones who will be troubled most are the handful of people whose job is to deck out the king, enriching themselves with the budget meant for that."

"I see…," said the man. The woman did not change her expression and continued driving.

"That's why I have decided to live with the one I love. I've had enough living like a bird in a cage," the king said decidedly.

"This love of yours must be quite a beauty, huh?" the man asked cheerfully.

"Why, of course," the king answered. "I shudder whenever I recall that beauty. That we can live together always from now on… makes me feel tremendous happiness deep inside my soul."

"How did you first meet?"

"One day, a festival was held in the castle town. Only on such occasions can I participate, hiding my real identity. I'm surrounded with an annoying entourage, though. Then, I met her, who came from the outskirts of the country. One glance and it was as if I heard the sound of the world being redrawn in an instant by an angel of love. It was a divine moment."

The man whistled. "But your highness, couldn't you just have called her to the castle?"

"When I told this to my heartless and ignorant henchmen, they treated me as if I was sick. They called a doctor and tried to give me some terrible medicine. It seems they think that there are more appropriate women for me. ——Ugh! Rubbish. Anyway, they will probably arrange it to be someone's haughty daughter."

"I see…. But isn't that great? You threw away everything for the sake of your romance," the man said, and the king replied with a slightly dejected tone,

"I'm truly sorry that I got you involved like this. I'm truly grateful. You were able to get me out with little trouble. And without asking for a reward…"

Then, the woman behind the wheel who was silent until now slowly spoke. "Your highness, we were touched by your sincere feelings. For that, pretending to be kidnappers is not a big deal."

The man also smiled. "Anyway, our notoriety is well-known everywhere. Your highness made the right choice."

"… I will never forget you both. Someday if a child is born between us, the beautiful fruit of our love will be named after you."

"That's an honor, your highness. Please make a lot of cute babies. Soon, you can reveal yourself. Until then, I apologize for keeping you in such a strange position," said the man.

—

The car reached the outskirts of the country, as the walls came into view. Pastures spread out all over the whole vicinity.

The king gave the woman directions.

Eventually,

“Oh, over there. That lone house in the meadows. There’s no doubt about it.”

“Ah, this place is nice,” the man said.

The car stopped in front of a cozy little house. It seemed like it belonged to a farming family, as a silo can be seen behind it.

The king borrowed the man’s hand to crawl out from the back seat, and immediately shouted,

“Marie!”

And then he rushed to the house.

"So it's 'Miss Marie', huh?" the man said happily, and from the back of the house,

"Who is it?" the clear voice of a woman was heard.

The king hastily turned to the back of the house. The two followed after him.

At the back, there was a small barn and a well where water could be drawn. Beside a big bucket where the water was collected, there was a girl.

"Marie!" the king said happily, arms wide open and face beaming with delight.

The girl saw the king. Her long chestnut hair was braided on both sides, and her neat facial features were left with a few freckles. The sleeves of her checked shirt were rolled up, letting a sheep drink water from her hands.

"Oh…" The girl stood up as she spoke. She wiped her hands lightly on her apron.

"You're the mister from the festival, right?"

The king gave a small nod.

"Yeah. I'm so glad you remembered me…. I came to see you. Since that day, that time…, I wanted to see you again —— "

The king cut short his words, and slowly proceeded with his confession.

"I couldn't forget about you. That's why I discarded my previous life, and I'm here now…. That is… From here on, I want to always be with you. I want us to live together. There's nothing else in this world more important to me than you. …. So, I want to stay here. I want to live here with you…. Is that not possible…?"

The girl's face showed a bit of surprise, "I know how you feel."

Then she smiled and asked the king, "If you live here, will you help with the work?"

"Of course! I'll do anything!" the king answered right away.

The girl coyly lowered her gaze, and asked in a gentle, but clear tone. “Will you… be kind?”

The king looked straight at the girl’s eyes. “Yes. I swear to God. … Is that good enough?”

“Yes…”

The girl nodded a little shyly, but firmly. The king slowly stepped forward and approached. Before the two travelers who looked on, the king kneeled by the girl’s side,

“Marie!” he exclaimed, and embraced the sheep that was drinking water.[3]

“Marie! Marie! Marie!”

“*Meeeeeee-eee*,” the sheep cried out as if it was in pain. The girl squatted beside them, and spoke,

“Look, mister. Don’t squish her too much. Marie hates that.”

“Ah, sorry. I’m just so happy right now…. I love Marie so much.”

"I know how you feel," the girl said. The king once again threw his arms around the white and fluffy hair of the sheep.

"Oh, Marie. From now on we will be together. Until you die, I will devote my life to you. Our love will be for eternity."

"Isn't that great, Marie?"

"Meeeeeeee-ee!"

Behind the two humans and one sheep,

"……"

The male traveler made a face that was very hard to describe.

The female traveler simply stood without changing her expression. And then she spoke.

"Well then, it's about time for us to go."

The small, yellow, battered car that looked as if it's going to break at any moment ran through the meadows while the sound of its rickety engine reverberated. The walls reflected in the side mirror steadily became lower and soon disappeared.

The man in the passenger seat looked bored, tinkering with his favorite hand persuader (Note: A persuader is a gun. In this case, a pistol). It was a slender, automatic-type, with a weighted square barrel.

When he got tired of this, he put away the persuader in the holster on his left hip, and opened his mouth to speak.

"Master…"

"What is it?"

"Umm, about the king and Marie… is that okay?"

The woman answered, "Who knows? If they themselves say it's fine, maybe everything will be all right."

"… Well, I suppose that's true, but…," the man took one deep breath, and changed the topic. "Besides that, I have better opinion of you, Master."

"About what?"

"You accepted this job even if there's not much money involved. Though it turned out like this… Despite your outward appearance, are you actually a romantic?"

The woman looked at the man for a moment. "That may be true. Take the bag under my seat."

"?"

The man stretched his hand to the back seat and took the bag under the driver's seat. He wondered why it was awfully heavy and took a look inside. A fairly large number of glittering bracelets, rings, jewels, and gold coins were inside.

"……"

The man became speechless for a while.

"… Uh, Master… what is this?" the man asked.

"Those were things from the king's room and the hallways. I packed them up since we're at it," the woman answered frankly.

"Master…"

"Hmm?"

"Have you heard of the term 'fire looters'[4]?"

"Yeah," the woman said shortly, and then, "He wouldn't have any need for those anyway. Besides,"

"Besides?"

"'Our notoriety is well-known everywhere', *right?*"

The car spouted white smoke intermittently as it ran.

"Master…"

"Hmm?"

"If this leaks out, our physical descriptions will be distributed to other travelers for sure."

"I don't really mind. —— Do you want to go home now?" the woman said, stopping the car which was now spitting black smoke.

The man in the passenger seat was silent for a while, and then spoke.

"…Hey Master, let's have that broken window fixed."

"One of these days then," was the woman's short answer as she started the car.

“Along a River” —Intermission—

Chapter Three

"Along a River"

— Intermission —

My name is Riku. I'm a dog.

I have long, white, bushy fur. I always look happy and smiling, but it doesn't mean that I am. I'm just born this way.

Shizu is my master. He is a young man always wearing a green sweater who lost his homeland due to some complex circumstances and is now traveling in a buggy.

—

We were in a spring forest surrounded by brilliant greenery. The morning sun was warm.

We could hear the sound of water. Right before us was a wide multi-stage waterfall. Its water formed a river that flowed through the ground covered with short grass and scattered thick trees.

In the middle of the river, a buggy was standing. More than half of its tires were submerged in the water, so it looked as if the car was floating in the river.

Master Shizu, wearing a sweater with rolled-up sleeves, was cleaning up the buggy; his jeans below the knees were soaking wet. His boots, as well as a black bag and his beloved katana were placed side by side on the riverbank. I was watching over it while keeping an eye out for unwelcome guests. There were no particularly urgent matters so I just listened to the twittering of the birds.

—

We arrived here yesterday evening and set up a camp. In the morning, Master Shizu washed himself and his clothes in the river. When it was my turn, I humbly declined, so he pushed me into the water and washed me too. My fur is almost dry now.

After that, he did something really unexpected.

"Buggy also needs to be cleaned up from time to time, " he said, and drove the car into the river to a reasonable depth. He began washing the buggy covered with dust, oil and mud. He worked as *joyfully* as he did a while ago while washing me. The water under the car instantly became dirty, but soon it was driven away by the clean water from the stream.

—

In the last country.

The residents didn't actually put it into words, but judging by their faces and the atmosphere, they wanted an outsider to leave their country as soon as possible.

Master Shizu also kept it to himself, but he realized what was going on. That's why he didn't look for any work; he just sold all he could, bought what he needed, and in the evening we left this country.

The birds were twittering.

Master Shizu rinsed the cloth with the water under his feet and wrung it out, then he wiped the car body and the seats. He pondered over something for a moment, and then he climbed up the riverbank. While I looked at him, trying to figure out what he's doing, he picked up a fallen tree branch and returned to the buggy.

Using this branch he carefully rubbed off the mud from the pipe frame.

Suddenly I decided to ask a question I never asked before. I wondered where he got this buggy.

"Didn't I tell you?" he said, a little surprised. Then he explained to me how it happened, while continuing to clean up the buggy.

Once, before we met, Master Shizu was forced to travel on foot as there were no traveling merchants who needed bodyguards, and the next country wasn't so far away. On his way there, he stumbled upon a battlefield site. Not long ago a place of fierce combat, now it was a heap of broken vehicles and frozen corpses covered with a thin layer of snow.

Master Shizu searched for something of value. He examined the arms and fingers of each and every body, but found nothing. And then he discovered this buggy. Miraculously, it was almost undamaged and the engine was in good condition. He removed the bodies from the top of the car and gathered up fuel and fuel cans——
And from that time onwards he has been using this buggy to travel.

—

"So that's how it was," I said.

He laughed and added: "After driving for a while I smelled a terrible stink. When I examined the buggy, I found out that the source of smell was a rotting hand stuck to the bottom of the car."

"Well, the buggy has never been serviced properly, and it even might be the first time it has been cleaned so thoroughly," he said.

Master Shizu bent over the far side of the car. After a while he gave a small shout of surprise. When he got up, he held something in his hands.

It appeared to be a thin steel plate — about the size of a notebook. It had the same color as the buggy and folded in two with a hinge. Master Shizu said that it was inserted in a crack in the car's body. He threw away the branch, opened the plate, and examined it.

When the branch slowly floating downstream completely disappeared from view, a light smile appeared on his face. He was holding this plate with both hands, smiling quietly.

'What is it?' I asked. Master Shizu approached me, pushing his way through the water, and laid the plate in front of me.

I read the letters carved in the plate.

—

Our dear horses…

We will fight. To defend our beloved motherland. To defend our beloved families.

We are soldiers, thus we are prepared to die on the battlefield .

We will fight till death, therefore our motherland will come out victorious and the peace in our families will be preserved.

Our dear horses—— Together we will fight and together we will die.

You were born to fight. You were born to plunge deep into the enemy lines and rush through the gunfire.

It is you whom we'll ride and fight on, and you'll be the place of our death.

And then you shall die in obscurity, embracing our corpses.

—

In other words it was a letter from the soldiers to this buggy.

After Master Shizu finished reading, he lifted his head and looked at the buggy completely cleared of mud.

"Huh, it's no different from me," he said.

I didn't grasp the meaning of it, so he looked at me and laughed slightly.

"We both didn't die where we were supposed to."

Master Shizu picked up the steel plate, folded it up and threw it away.

It flew for a while spinning around, then fell in the river and sank.

He sat in the driver's seat and turned on the engine.

The engine was humming. He ran the buggy onto the riverbank, and the water flowed down on the grass.

He wiped his legs, put on his boots and loaded the luggage. I jumped onto the passenger seat. My fur and my seat were still wet, but I think it'll dry up pretty soon.

Master Shizu raced the engine and it hummed smoothly.

“That mechanic did a great job,” he said suddenly.

I remembered dull snowy plain and completely white dreary scenery[5].

“Right,” I agreed.

“Well, shall we go?” he asked and looked at me.

“Where are we going?” I inquired.

“I don’t know. Some unknown place,” he answered, and the buggy started running.

“A Winter Tale” —D—

Chapter Four

"A Winter Tale"

— D —

It was a small room.

At its center was a single wooden bed. There was no way two such beds would fit in the room.

A painting was hanging from the low, light brown wall. It was bordered in such a way that made it look like a large window. It depicted an angel with fluttering white wings amidst a scenery of blue sky and animals feeding on the grass of a green prairie.

There was not a single real window in this room. It was being faintly illuminated by a dim light bulb suspended from the ceiling.

A human was lying on the bed.

It was a middle-aged woman. She was covered in a thick blanket of a light green color, and her head was sunk into a big pillow. Her eyes were open and looking straight ahead, but there was nothing she was gazing at in particular. Her slow, thin breaths escaped from her lifelessly opened mouth.

There were five people around the bed.

Four of them were two men and two women who were wearing the same clothes. They were clad in no other color but white from head to toe — white aprons, white caps, and white masks. They were standing on both sides of the bed.

The fifth was a young person wearing a black jacket. Perhaps around mid-teens, she had a fearless face framed with short black hair. She was standing at the foot of the bed with a big cloth bag hanging down from her left hand.

The four in white gazed towards the person in the bed and began to chat. There was no reply, but as if there was , they continued the dialogue meant for five people.

It was talk about the past. It was a recollection of the things the five of them shared and enjoyed together. Occasionally, the four would laugh merrily.

The person dressed in the black jacket looked on and stood quietly without saying anything. It’s as if she were looking at a distant and alien world.

The conversation continued at length. As the four broke into a fit of laughter, a faint smile slowly formed on the feeble mouth of the person on the bed who was only strong enough to breath.

One of the four noticed this, and quickly called the attention of the other three with a gesture. The four peered at the face of the bedridden woman.

The person in black inserted her right hand inside the cloth bag. With her left hand, she separated the cloth bag from a smaller bag, and let it fall to the floor without a sound. The form of the object she was grasping with her right hand was gradually revealed.

It was a long and narrow black mass of plastic and metal.

She lifted it up. It sent forth a thin red light which stopped precisely into a tiny dot on the bedridden woman's breast.

The four in white did not pay heed.

A low explosive sound echoed in the tiny room. Three times in succession. Three dry, metallic sounds were heard right after.

The person the four were watching intently suddenly trembled as if hit by a small amount of electric shock. The person's head rose a little from the pillow, and as if it lost strength, sank back into the pillow once more. Her eyes were still slightly open, but her thin respiration came to a stop. Slowly but steadily, a dark red stain appeared on the portion of the blanket where the chest was located. It didn't spread out any further.

The person in black was gripping the hand persuader (Note: A gun. In this case a pistol) with both hands. It was a 9mm automatic with a built-in safety in the trigger. It was attached with a laser sight and a cylindrical suppressor (restrains the sound of the gunfire). Three empty cartridges rolled on the floor.

The four turned around.

One pair of eyes between the white mask and cap glared at the person holding the persuader.

"[Heretic, what a thing to do!]" The man said with a soft voice.

"[I killed because I wanted to kill.]" The person in black answered in a similarly soft voice.

"[Heretic, leave this place.]"

"[That I shall do.]"

After the short interchange, the person in black returned the persuader in the bag. She laid her hands on the door behind her and pushed it open.

One of the four gently closed the eyelids of the deceased, and then called out to the person in black who was about to go out.

"Thank you. …Thank you very much."

Without answering the voice heavy with emotion, the person clad in black quietly disappeared from the room.

—

There was a gate.

The country was surrounded by high walls made out of gigantic rocks put together. There was only a single enormous door made of steel. It was tightly shut.

There was an expanse of forest just outside the country . It was a forest dense with tall and slender conifers.

It was covered with snow as deep as a child is tall. The ground was completely invisible. Amidst the damp atmosphere, the low clouds created a sky of a greyish shade.

A corridor began beside the closed gate. Its tall, gabled roof continued straight into the forest. It was laid out with stone paving, and on both sides were sturdy fences to keep out the snow. The weir-like corridor was sandwiched between the piles of snow fended off by the roof.

There was a small door for people to pass through beside the massive gate. Stones were affixed on the door, making it indistinguishable. Soon this door opened inwards with a gentle creaking sound.

The person in black came out from the door holding a bag. On her right thigh was a holster that was not there before. Inside it was a high caliber revolver.

Two guards followed her from behind. The guards were holding long spears in their hands, and they were wearing military uniforms adorned with ceremonial ornaments.

The guards stood on both sides of the door. The gazes underneath their decorated helmets were sharp. As the person in black looked back, the guards tapped the stone floor by their feet with their spears, creating a solid sound.

"[Heretic, murderer of our brethren, leave this country at once!]" One of the guards spoke in a stern and loud voice.

The person in black placed the bag containing the persuader by the guard's feet. She spoke with no visible change in her expression.

"[I understand. I will leave this country right away.]"

Then she straightened up and turned away from the guards. She took a step towards the corridor inside the forest. The thin layer of snow crunched beneath her footsteps.

The guards remained standing on attention, but their stiff expressions crumbled down. One of them called out to the person in black with a tone of familiarity.

"We will send them later, as always."

The person did not look back, and answered.

"I understand. Please leave it at the usual place."

"Roger, Miss Kino. Thank you very much."

The guard positioned his spear in front of his body.

—

The person in black called Kino slowly proceeded through the corridor. On both sides, there were pillars lined up in regular intervals, and the gentle snowdrifts beyond.

The sky became dimmer, and rain began to fall as if some unknown omen. The damp and heavy snow was strewn all at once. It fell endlessly without making the slightest sound.

Kino stopped in her tracks and looked left and right.

The snow falling in the space between the snowdrift and roof of the corridor gave off a sensation; one of being drowned in a continuously rising world.

"……"

After looking for a while, Kino eventually faced forward and continued her walk along the corridor.

Behind Kino, the angry peals of bells were heard from the country.

—

At the end of the corridor was a lone building.

It was a big building standing in isolation inside the forest. It was sturdily built out of stone and lumber. The corridor was connected to the entrance of the big, chimneyed, box-shaped building. Beyond, there was a long and narrow hallway lined up with rooms. Thick snow has accumulated on the roof, and a number of icicles were hanging down from it.

Kino brushed off the snow at her feet as she stepped up the high entrance. She opened the sliding door and entered the building.

There was a big living room immediately upon entry. The furniture was uniform and there were fireplaces and wood stoves on both ends of the room. The forest scenery could be seen beyond a large glass window. The snow continued to fall in the pale darkness.

Kino continued to the interior of the corridor and entered the first room. An electric light lit up as she pushed open a switch at the side.

Inside the room was a bed, a desk, a chair, and a small dresser, above which was a big traveling bag. Warm curtains were closed over a window. A motorrad (Note: A two-wheeled vehicle. Only to note that it cannot fly) was parked in one corner of the room.

“Ah, good morning,” said the motorrad, though the sun was about to set.

“Good morning, Hermes.”

“Welcome home. How’s work?” the motorrad called Hermes asked Kino.

“There were three people,” answered Kino.

“That’s a lot. That’s why you were late.”

“Yeah——”

The next morning, Kino woke up at dawn.

Snow was still falling down vehemently. The sky was a dark gray. Other than the forest scenery, only the snow lashing in different directions could be viewed beyond the window.

She used the empty living room for her light exercises. Kino practiced her quick draw with 'Canon' and performed its maintenance afterwards.

Kino took a shower using the warm water drawn from inside the country and changed her clothes.

On one side of the building was a firewood shed. There was also a big stone box beside it. Kino opened it and took out some potatoes, onions, and sausages stored inside.

She hewed enough firewood to burn in the kitchen stove. Then she recklessly placed a frying pan above the

flames, tossed the chopped ingredients inside it all at once and brought it to a boil. She ate half of it for breakfast.

She boiled water in a small cup, and drank her tea.

The sun has risen way above the clouds, and it has become a bit brighter outside. Snow was still falling.

Kino came back to the room and pushed Hermes into the living room. She set him up on his center stand beside the window.

"Ah, Kino. The bell?" Hermes asked.

"There's none today," Kino answered.

Firewood was burning in the fireplace, and it has become warmer indoors.

Kino took off her jacket and sat on a chair in the living room wearing her shirt. On the desk, various sizes of knives were lined up neatly along with a small bottle containing oil, and a sharpening stone.

“Done. I don’t have anything else to do for today,” Kino said.

“You have free time, eh. What about a round of *shiritori*[6]?” Hermes suggested. Snow was still falling beyond the slightly cloudy windows.

Kino made a bitter face. “I will lose because you use weird words…”

“Eh? But, there really is a dish called ‘Susannas’.”

“…… Maybe I should have my lunch…”

Kino arranged the knives and put them in the pouches and the bag.

Kino took the covered frying pan beside the window. She thrust it into the fireplace as it is.

She ate the warmed food, washed the frying pan with melted snow, and hung it back in its place.

While Kino was drinking her after meal tea, she heard footsteps by the entrance, and then there were several knocks on the door.

“Oh, how rare. We have guests,” Hermes said, and Kino stood up.

“Just like us.”

—

“This must be it, there’s no doubt. ——Well, there’s nothing else in this forest anyway.”

It was a man in his forties. His face and chin was covered with beard, and his hair down his back was tied together messily. He was wearing winter clothes and a

wool hat. He was carrying a big luggage on his back, and was walking on top of the snow using handmade wooden snow shoes.

“I’m a traveler. My name is Dis[7]. I was told by the guards to come here. It’s nice to meet you.”

“I’m Kino. This here is my partner, Hermes.”

“Hello there.”

The man called Dis set down his luggage by the entrance, and remarked at the exquisiteness of the place. He removed the snow shoes outside, took off his winter clothing, and emerged in his sweater.

Kino offered him a seat. Dis thanked her, sat down, and gave a big sigh of relief. Then he told her that he was traveling with a horse when it collapsed in the snow, and he ended up getting caught in a terrible snowstorm. He managed to arrive in the country that morning.

And then he spoke to Kino. “I was quite surprised to see someone as young as you on a journey.”

“Someone like me?”

"Well, please don't be offended. But for someone to go about exiling himself from his homeland and wander about on a journey — there must be 'a certain reason'. To put it bluntly, most travelers are people who are no longer needed in their homelands, for one reason or another. I have nothing to hide, I am one such person. And there's really no need to cross-examine each other. Let's just get along," Dis said cheerfully. Kino lightly nodded without changing her expression.

"You see, I came here without the least bit of an idea about this country. It's fun that way though. After the entry procedures, I wasn't surprised at all when they told me I had to earn my keep if I wanted to stay here until spring; in fact it's quite the opposite. When they realized that I didn't know a thing, they only told me to come here and ask you for the details. If I work, I would be able to stay here, right?"

"Yes, that's right."

"Not to boast, but I have a skill that is popular in any kind of country; something that would earn me money anywhere I go. I'll probably get rich soon."

"I see. But——" Kino continued, "In this country, what we will be doing will not need that much skill."

Dis was slightly taken aback. "Is that so…? Well, what are we going to do then?" he asked Kino.

Kino remained expressionless as she answered the question.

"We will be killing people from this country."

—

Kino explained everything to Dis, with Hermes butting in at times.

Because of a peculiar religion, 'medical treatment' was unknown in this country.

According to their doctrine, it was unforgivable for a person to perform some process on another person's body. It was their God's will. All humans have their

place in nature; therefore, humans have to live in nature the same way as animals, and rely on their own bodies' capacity to heal. Other than giving birth naturally, humans also have to die naturally. Any form of medical treatment or surgical operation done by other people are all artificial, and hence, evil. It's the best-known way for the soul to be denied passage to heaven.

No person can intervene with an injury or illness. The body should heal on its own. The only thing the people around could do is to confine the patient and give him food and water when he asks for it.

Whether it's a light injury or illness, or something serious, it is only natural to leave it as is and wait for the results. Because of this, almost all of the people in this country experience pain until they finally die 'naturally'.

And in time, requests to put out of misery the people who were beyond hope appeared. However, their countrymen could not kill them. It's considered murder — a one-way ticket to hell.

There was only one way to reach heaven without dying naturally. A doctrine in use during times of war states that a person killed by a heretic would go to heaven without question.

In short, it's a 'trip to Mars'. 'Martyrdom?' ——Yeah, that's it.

A long, long time ago, they asked a traveler who was staying in the country to do this for them. The traveler accepted and killed the patient. As punishment, he was banished outside the country—— and received a reward from the family of the person he killed.

Eventually, the private requests were managed by the government. They built a place 'outside the country' for travelers to stay in, and upon accomplishing the requests, they will have to 'leave the country' as punishment. They will be promised a reward of food and other things, but they were especially prohibited to reenter the country after all is over.

To prevent them from residing permanently, the longest a heretic could stay was ninety days, or one season. There were people who stay for just one day and leave immediately, and there were also those who stay

up until the last moment. During winters with particularly heavy snowfall, it's either no one comes, or someone would stay until spring.

And then, Kino told him that she has already spent thirty days, and plans to stay until the snow was light enough to ride on.

—

Dis did not say a word. He listened to the explanation, all the while having a sullen expression on his face.

After narrating these circumstances, Kino then gave a simple explanation of the building they're now in. It has many rooms in its interior, and it has electricity, water, and their daily supply of food and firewood. It will be the joint property of the people living in it. However, the euthanasia requests will have to be equally shared between them, and will be handled alternately. Those were the conditions.

"For the killing itself, they will be lending us a persuader and bullets at the gates. After the job is done, we will be treated like 'heretics', but there will be no problems as long as we answer properly."

And then Hermes asked, "Okay, any questions?"

"I have." At last, Dis opened his mouth to speak.

"So far, among the people you have 'euthanized', were there some… no, was there even one who could have been saved by the medical technology in the country you were born in?"

Kino pondered for a while and answered, "Probably."

"If that's the case…, then what you have been doing could be considered as 'murder', right?"

"I guess so."

"Is murder… legal in your country?"

"Who knows? I don't really understand perfectly how 'the world of adults' work."

"……"

"Do you have any other questions? If none, then that's it."

"……. It's murder. I can't do something like that."

"Is that so?"

"……"

Hermes questioned Dis, who was still glaring at Kino.

"Mister, you said it yourself, haven't you? You went on a journey because you were driven out of your country for 'a certain reason'. Until this day, have you no 'experience' in killing a person, not even once?"

Dis was surprised for a moment and his expression became dark. Then he shook his head.

"No…. I do have."

"If that's the case——" Kino spoke. "Then there's no need for me to keep you here. There's no reason for that. "

—

Evening.

Dis was sitting on the bed inside the room he had chosen. A small lamp was attached on the ceiling. A small leather briefcase was placed on top of the table. Beside it were the paper pack remains of his portable rations.

Outside the window, snow was falling soundlessly in the dark.

“What on earth… I shouldn’t have come to this kind of country…,” Dis muttered. He slowly shifted his gaze to the leather briefcase.

“What on earth… What in the world…”

He continued to mutter words nobody could hear.

Kino was in her own room, sitting on top of her bed. A small lamp was attached on the ceiling, its reflection distorted on Hermes' tank. The curtains were closed.

"'It's not something I would like to do, and I think it's wrong,'…eh?" Kino muttered.

"Kino is Kino. Instead of worrying about that, you should plan what you would do once spring comes," Hermes answered.

"Spring—— it's still far off."

Morning.

Color has returned slightly to the snowy forest by the end of the night. The gray color has turned into a

brighter shade of light blue. The white snow and the green leaves, as well as the row of brown tree trunks appeared once more.

Kino came out to the living room from the corridor, opened the window and looked outside.

It has stopped snowing but the sky remained cloudy. The snow accumulated in the forest has become even thicker. There were no sound of chirping birds; only the sound of snow falling from the trees could be heard from time to time.

In this cold weather, Kino began to move her body. After her warm-up exercise, she practiced her quick draw.

She took a shower and changed her clothes. She slung Canon on her waist belt, and wore her black jacket on top of her white shirt. She tapped Hermes awake and set him up beside a chair in the living room.

Like the previous day, she made the same amount of the same kind of food.

Dis came to the living room just when Kino was having her after meal tea.

Kino was slightly surprised, and Hermes spoke.

"Who are you?"

Dis shaved off all of his beard, and carefully cut his hair short. He looked rather young.

Dis still had his gloomy expression from the night before. He exchanged morning greetings with Kino and Hermes and sat in a chair.

"You did that by yourself?" Kino asked.

Dis said 'yes' and gave a small nod.

"You're so good at it, I'm quite jealous."

Dis did not answer. Kino pointed out to the frying pan in the kitchen. She told him that he could have the food she cooked for herself, and he doesn't have to wash the frying pan afterwards.

Right then, they heard the bells tolling from the country. It resounded madly; the peals overlapped with one another.

"That bell is a signal to let the citizens know that 'a heretic is going to attack'."

Dis silently turned to the kitchen and reheated the contents of the frying pan, and then he returned to his seat.

"You'll have to be warned before eating that."

"……"

Dis looked at Kino once and then looked at the frying pan's contents. Then he started to eat the food that Kino prepared.

"This is the daily menu. What will you have for today?"

"How was it?"

Kino and Hermes asked almost at the exact same time. Dis did not answer and continued to eat in silence.

He ate all of it and put the frying pan and fork aside. Dis looked at Kino. He was staring at her with the same sullen look he had the previous night. At last he spoke,

"I'll go today."

"I'll go today, without complains," he repeated as he stood up and disappeared into his room. Soon after, he came out wearing his hat and winter clothing. He was carrying a small leather briefcase.

"And I'll make sure you won't have to go starting tomorrow," Dis said.

Kino slowly stood up from her chair. "What do you mean?"

"If there's a way to save a person, I will save him."

"How in the world?" Hermes asked from behind.

"Of course, by medical treatment."

"Even if by some miracle you do happen to 'persuade' them, there are no doctors in this country. They might have never heard of 'medical treatment' either," Kino said.

Dis nodded. "That may be true."

“What are you going to do? Phone a doctor from some far-away place?” Hermes said, and this time, Dis slowly shook his head.

“There’s no need for that. ——There’s a doctor right here.”

Dis opened wide the bag for Kino and Hermes to see. First there were scalpels and files neatly lined up, along with a stethoscope and syringes. In the interior of the bag , there was a case containing various medical tools.

“……. I thought you were a barber.”

“That was a surprise.”

Kino and Hermes said. Dis nodded several times and closed the bag.

“I was a doctor. Haven’t I told you? ‘I have a skill that is popular in any kind of country.’”

“I see.”

“I get it.”

"I worked in the hospitals in the countries where I have dropped by. I learned things, and sometimes, taught them."

"Okay, but why?" Hermes asked.

Dis smiled bitterly, "'No reason', I guess."

"A 'deal' between Kino and you?"

"Hahaha," Dis continued to laugh bitterly. And then,

"Then let me tell you — why I was deemed useless in my home country. It's a pretty ridiculous story considering our situation here. To put it simply, 'I was a doctor. I killed my patients on purpose because there was nothing that could have saved them.'"

"That means, you…," Kino hesitated.

"That means you performed euthanasia," Hermes blurted out.

"I told you that I have 'experience', haven't I?"

"I see."

Kino remained silent, waiting for Hermes' words.

"In short that was the 'certain reason' you were talking of. Am I wrong?"

"Yes, exactly. I don't mean to brag, but the medical field is rather advanced in my home country. I didn't know it back when I was still there, but now that I think about it, ours was really much more advanced. I learned a lot of things there. But, even so, there are always patients who are 'beyond hope'. No treatment or medicine could heal them, and all we can do is to ease their agony. But there was a limit to that too. I never thought that we doctors were lacking in terms of competency. But at those times, we were completely powerless."

"And so, there were people who wanted to be put out of misery," Hermes said.

"Yes. Those who can't be healed with our current medical technology. Those whose pain can no longer be relieved. Such patients willfully desire a peaceful death… to end their suffering, to remain recognizable even with

their broken bodies and mind, to be surrounded by the things and the people that they love, to 'embark on their journey' with a smile and an elegant farewell speech."

"Like the people of the country closest to us?" Kino asked.

"Like the people of the country closest to us," Dis answered, and continued, "But that is illegal in our country. There are various reasons, but at the end of the day, it all comes home to one conclusion: 'No matter what the state of the patient is, no matter how many people wish for it, a doctor who performs euthanasia is a murderer.'"

"And you did it."

"Yeah. But until I have decided, it wasn't as easy as worrying 'how much salt and pepper were sprinkled in my food'. I worried for several years."

"Then, what happened?"

"I continued to live this double life for so many years. One side gives life, the other takes it. It's ironic how I received gratitude for both. Then one day, I was suddenly arrested by the police."

"Then, then?"

"The whole country was shocked with the number of people I have killed. Euthanasia became the talk of the town, but nothing has changed for me. I thought I would be given a life sentence at best, and death penalty otherwise. I have no idea what would happen to me, but I prepared myself for the worst. ——When I heard that I would be banished, I was oblivious of what was happening for a moment. It was like that."

"I see. Now I get it. Thanks."

"You're welcome," Dis moved his gaze from Hermes to Kino.

"I'm sorry for bothering you with such a long story. I should be going now. I plan to do as much as I could. If it 's acceptable for them to have their countrymen killed by a heretic, then I will do it. But, I will do it using my own methods. My hands might slip, and treat a wound accidentally. Also I might mix a lethal medicine with one that is effective for a person's illness. If as a result, the person recovers from it, then it is by his own body's capacity, and I am not to blame."

Kino asked, "I don't know whether these people would buy that excuse without any objections. Even so, are you still going to do it?"

"Yes."

"'Do or die', right?"

"Life is like that. The decisions made by the living become a choice between 'life and death'. They're related . Until now, I have let other people decide for me. From now on, I'll decide for myself. Last night, I was thinking of what I should do. In the end, it's not a question of ' what I should do' but of 'what I want to do'."

"I see…. What if I 'persuade' you to stop?"

Dis understood in an instant. "Ah, I see, so it's like that ——. If I succeed, then you won't be able to stay here. In other words, you will lose your 'job' and 'a place to stay'. "

"That's right. Maybe I'd stop you even if I had to kill you. If it's in order to live, maybe I wouldn't hesitate."

Kino glanced at Canon on her right thigh and placed her hand on her right waist.

"Is that a .44 caliber revolver? That's a scary thing you have there. If you shoot me, I might die."

"Yeah."

"Even so I will still go," Dis answered. He held his bag with his right hand, and tapped his chest with his left fist .

"When you shoot, please fire three at once to my heart. ——Don't make me suffer," were the words he left with a smile as he headed towards the entrance. He opened the door. The moment he went out of the building,

"I am wishing that the bells will not have to toll," Kino said. Dis didn't turn around, and only his voice returned.

"People can't be saved with that 'wish'."

"I know."

"Too bad."

"Yeah, too bad."

Dis began to walk, and his back became smaller as he advanced. The hand on Kino's waist dropped until the holster.

Dis suddenly turned around. He faced Kino with a smile, and spoke with a loud voice. "Oh yeah, I forgot to say one thing!"

"What is it?"

"The food you cooked earlier. It was so delicious! Thank you. —— Bye."

"……"

Shock was painted on Kino's face. Without saying anything, she waited until his figure vanished from sight, and closed the door.

—

Noon passed by.

The snow has stopped falling.

The wind blew away the clouds and slowly, the blue sky became visible.

—

Evening came.

Red rays of light escaped from the gaps between the remaining clouds.

On the desk inside the living room, Kino disassembled , cleaned, and reassembled the automatic type she called 'Woodsman'.

When she was finished, Kino lifted her face. Beyond the windows, water was continually dripping from the icicles.

The sound of footsteps was heard, and someone knocked at the door. The sound awoke the sleeping Hermes.

"We have guests."

Kino holstered Woodsman and stood up.

"Miss Kino. Are you there?" came a voice. It was familiar.

"Oh, it's just the guards," Hermes said. Kino opened the entrance and invited the guards inside. One of the guards was carrying a wooden box. The other one was not carrying anything.

"Miss Kino, we have sad news for you," the guard who always saw Kino off began.

"What would that be?"

The guard remained standing at attention, and proceeded with the news.

"[The heretic who entered our country today was in firm isolation after causing harm to our brethren who were fighting against their illnesses. It was the man who came here yesterday.]"

"……"

"Uh-huh, and then?"

"[The harm he inflicted upon our brethren was not serious, and our brethren soon recovered after demonstrating the strong natural healing powers of our kind. But we cannot possibly pardon this man's actions, and so we restrained him. To never let such a thing happen again, he is to be punished, and we demand him to apologize to our brethren who are currently battling their afflictions. He was grateful for our lenient treatment , and accepted his punishment wholeheartedly. He wouldn't come back to this place for a while. It is so that he wouldn't exact the same harm again. If he were to do the same foolish thing once more, he will have to undergo this divine retribution for eternity.]"

"I see. What a troublesome guy."

"True, true."

"[Indeed. We have no inkling as to what goes on in his mind. As for you Miss Kino, we will have to restrict your entry and actions in the country until that man is reformed. From now on, we will not hand you a persuader when you come into the country.]"

"I understand."

“[And lastly, though that man was a foolish criminal, we guaranteed him his living necessities, and will give him what we have in stock out of kindness. When we told him that, he brazenly declared: ‘I don’t eat much, so please give half to any other heretic under your care.]’”

“……”

“[We cannot consume what this criminal heretic has touched. But, the precious food given to us by God and nature cannot be thrown away as declared in our doctrine, and so we decided to dispose of them here. We will bring them every day, to you, and to all other people who would ask leave to reside in this place.]”

Then the other guard presented the wooden box he was holding. He opened the lid. Inside were the usual ingredients.

“[This is all we have to say! We are here to collect the criminal heretic’s belongings. Do you have a message you would like to convey to him?]”

“Yes. There’s just one thing,” Kino said with a smile.

“Go ahead.”

"I am sorry for making you eat *that* stuff. For some reason, you are the first one to say that it was delicious with a smile on your face."

"What?" the guard's stiff expression crumbled down.

From behind Kino, Hermes spoke with an amused tone,

"Master almost died from it, though."

"That time I thought she was shot or something."

The two guards looked at each other.

"[We'll tell him exactly as you said it.]"

"Please do."

And then the two guards carefully carried off all of Dis ' luggage and left the building.

—

The evening sun stained the world a bright red, and soon descended. The snow from the roof fell all at once with a loud sound.

Though it has become dark, the bell tolled once more in the country.

—

Evening.

Kino was in her own room, sitting on top of her bed. A small lamp was attached on the ceiling, its reflection distorted on Hermes' tank.

Kino's luggage was laid out on top of the bed.

Kino carefully put in order her folded shirts, hats, gloves, and other small accessories, and put them inside the bag.

After this, she closed the bag. She took the cup on top of the desk and slowly drank her tea, which has become a little cold.

"Say Kino, what will you do once spring comes?" Hermes asked, and Kino answered,

"Spring eh. Let's see… Again——"

“A Tale of a Tea Party in a Forest” —Thank You—

Chapter Five

"A Tale of a Tea Party in a Forest"

— Thank You —

This is a story that happened in a certain forest.

Inside a dark forest dense with all kinds of trees, there was a road. It was a perfectly straight, level dirt path that was easy to ride through. The gentle undulations on the earth repeatedly overlap with the terrain, consequently creating repeated undulations on the road itself.

No nearby country's walls could be seen; it was truly right in the middle of nature.

A river's gently flowing stream ran inside this forest. Perhaps it was a little small to swim in, but it might be big enough to play in. Its water was so clear that the mud at the bottom of the calm river could be seen very clearly.

The road becomes a bridge where it meets with the river. It was a rather ancient bridge built from stones put together.

Seated on this bridge was an old man who was letting a fishing line dangle down the stream.

It was a thin and tall, and considerably aged old man. Half of his head had graying hair, and half was already bald. He was dressed much like a farmer, wearing a

worker's overalls. Placed beside him was a bucket filled with water, but not a single fish was inside.

The sun was at its highest, leisurely warming the world. Clouds were unlikely to make shadows as they floated about in strips. A person who pays attention to the seasons would say that it's almost summertime.

The old man who was gripping the short rod suddenly lifted his face. He looked up, trying to peek at the other side of the road. The old man's ears were not mistaken, and just as he expected, he saw a car leisurely riding towards his direction, raising a thin layer of dust.

It was a small, yellow, and not so clean car. Its body was rusty here and there and it was chipped in places. The old man set aside his rod and waved to the car while being careful not to fall.

The car stopped on top of the bridge with a strange sound.

There were two people aboard. On the right side was the driver's seat, where a rather short but handsome young man wearing a hand persuader (Note: A persuader is a gun. In this case, a pistol) on his left hip, was seated. On the left side was a youthful woman with

lustrous, long black hair, wearing elegant-looking clothes and a high caliber revolver on her right hip. Both of them exchanged glances, as if surprised to find a person in such a place.

"Yo! You're travelers, aren't you?" the old man said in delight. The woman bowed in greeting.

"Hello. We were not expecting to meet anyone in a place like this."

"I am a person who abandoned his country. I live here with my wife, just the two of us," the old man said. Then he invited the surprised pair to come to his house. With a gentle smile, he told them that he would like to listen to stories of their travels while drinking some tea. And if they so choose, they could stay there for a while to rest their tired bodies.

"Since we're not in any hurry, we'll take up your kind offer," the woman said, and the old man's eyes narrowed .

"That's great. It seems that this day will be very enjoyable. My house is there, at the top of the stream. I will walk along the river up to my house. You have to make a little detour though. A little bit ahead of the road,

there's a narrow descending path to the left side. You can pass through that path with your car."

"Understood," the woman said. The man asked the old man a question as he returned to the car,

"Did you catch anything?"

"Yeah," the old man answered with a smile, lifting his rod and the bucket containing nothing but water. Then he skillfully coiled the line around the fishing rod with one hand.

"Then, we'll be waiting for you."

Leaving these words, he began to walk along the river.

"Master… are we really going?" the man asked the woman.

"Let's go. Tea from the forest is good stuff, you know," the woman answered immediately.

"Okay…," the man only muttered.

—

There was a house.

In one part of the house, there was a big square iron box that might have been originally a car. Its window frames were sealed with planks. Built attached on its side was a log cabin.

The house was built beside a river. The surrounding land was neatly cultivated and lined up with fields. Beside the house was a livestock pen where a few animals were kept.

The shabby yellow car came slowly down from the narrow forest road. It stopped in front of the house where the old man and an old woman were waiting.

The four exchanged greetings and the tiny-figured old woman with an ever-present smile on her face guided them to the log cabin. On the high entrance made of planks put together, lots of pretty flowers were blooming in several plant pots.

They entered the house. There was a huge living room immediately upon entry. It was a spacious house, and there seemed to be several rooms in its interior.

Indoors, the logs were quite skillfully put together, creating a space that was simple but beautiful. The furniture and tools were all hand-crafted from wood. The walls made of stacked logs were decorated with carved trays and several elegantly framed paintings of flowers. Similar pictures were painted on the dishes neatly lined up on the shelves. Hanging from the thick log pillar were two brooms made from neatly whittled branches.

On two wall surfaces were large windows made from modified glass panes of a car. Presently it was open, letting in the cool wind into the room. Beyond it, the fields, the beautiful forest, and the silently flowing river could be seen.

There was a table rounded from a big log, as well as chairs made from wood carefully put together. The woman and the man expressed their gratitude and sat on the chairs offered to them. The old man sat opposite them and the old woman went towards the cooking stove at one end of the room to prepare tea.

"What a nice house. I was surprised," the man said.

"I'm really glad to hear that," the old man said happily .

The old man talked about their circumstances. They were a married couple and had no children. In their youth, they felt bitterness towards their country and left on a journey by trailer. They had nowhere to immigrate in as there were no countries nearby, but the gentle climate of this forest suited them well so they started to live a self-sufficient. They used materials from nature, built a house, raised animals, grew vegetables, and produced various things with their own hands. For several decades, the two lived each day in peace. Their skills were very useful in making a living in such a place. They would invite the occasional traveler out to tea and hold a fun tea party.

"That's wonderful. I too, would love to settle down in a place like this when I grow old," the woman said gently. The man beside him became rather surprised.

"I didn't know you were having such thoughts, Master …"

"It's not like I wanted to do nothing but to travel my whole life, after all."

"Well, I see your point, but…"

After this exchange from the pair, the old man asked.

"Until when are you two planning to travel?"

"I guess until I finish my business," answered the man. He said things like not having any particular place to go to, not having anyone waiting for him in his homeland, and not having plans of setting up some business.

"Well, I'm someone you'd call a wanderer," the man said as if mocking himself. The woman had nothing to say in particular, and remained seated.

"Is that so…. Finding traveling painful or fun; there are various sides to it too, eh?" the old man said, seemingly moved.

"But, methinks staying in the same place the whole time is a little boring," the man said.

"There are fun things too. It's enjoyable to make various things with our hands, using materials from nature. This is our purpose in life."

"Everyone, tea's ready."

The old woman was holding a tray. Placed on it were four empty cups and a big teapot.

The woman expressed her interest in the cups, asked permission and took one in her hands. The cup had an almost perfect shape and was lacquered in a pretty color. It was a lovely cup.

"Did you also make this? It's very well done."

The old woman nodded happily. The old man told them that looking for earth suited for pottery was very hard, and after several years of searching inside the

forest without any luck, they found it by accident along the nearby riverbank.

"Now, now, the tea will get cold,"

The old woman poured tea in the four cups. She placed them in front of the guests and her husband, and sat down in her own chair.

"Thanks for the tea," said the woman. She carried the cup to her lips and tasted it after testing the temperature a little. 'It's delicious,' she said after taking a few sips. The old couple also savored their tea.

"……"

After some time, the man finally tasted his tea.

"I would have brought some sweets, but we finished them just yesterday, it's quite embarrassing…," the old woman said, and the woman immediately shook her head lightly.

"Please don't trouble yourself over us."

"Travelers, if you are not in any hurry, why don't you stay the night? It's been quite a while since we have had

a meal with other people, and we would like to hear stories from the outside," the old man said. And then, after one mouthful of tea, the woman shook her head.

"We can't do that."

The old couple was slightly taken aback. The woman set her cup on the table and suddenly stood up. Then she lifted her own chair and threw it towards the glass window.

There was a violent sound as the glass shattered. The chair broke as well.

"!"

"Aaaah!"

The old couple was surprised, and at the same time, the man beside them hurled his chair in the same manner . It broke as it hit the log walls.

The woman quickly walked to the dresser at the edge of the wall and kicked it. The thin plank was easily broken, and the small pot ornaments placed on it were

shattered irreparably. The man reached for the dishes above the shelves and shoved them to the edge. They fell on the wooden floor with a crash.

"W-what's this about?"

The old man was only able to say this much. Mixed shock and fear registered on his face, and the hands placed in front of his chest trembled.

"T-travelers! P-please stop! Please stop…"

Whether they heard it or not, the two visitors continued to diligently wreck the house. The man kicked and shattered the other glass window to smithereens. The woman dropped the paintings and stamped on the frames.

The old woman cried out.

"I beg you! Travelers! Don't break them! These are full of our memories! We apologize if we did something that did not please you! Please! Please…"

The pair was not yet finished. They continued to wreck the place.

"Ah! We are just feeble old folks. You can take anything you want; it doesn't matter. But please, our house… the only place that shields us from rain and wind… I'm begging you, please stop!"

The two still did not stop. There was no particular indication of hatred on their faces. They had normal expressions and a look of indifference, as if to say that they were only 'doing today's exercises'. They destroyed everything that caught their eyes. Almost everything hanging from the wall was broken.

"So cruel… Have we done anything that rubbed you the wrong way…? The house the two of us protected up to now… the memorable things…"

The old woman broke down crying on the floor while the old man's face became red with anger. He grabbed the broom hanging by the pillar, and holding the grip with both hands, brandished it towards the man trampling on the dishes near the wall. The old man couldn't possibly reach the man in at least five more steps, but he swung his weapon, raising overhead the narrow grip instead of the wide end.

"G-get out of here! Stop harassing us old people!"

'My, my,' thought the man, who simply ignored the old man who was confronting him aggressively. He grasped a nearby shelf with both hands, and put his weight on it to break it.

'My, my,' thought the woman as she saw this. She reached for her hip and pulled out the high caliber revolver from its holster.

Bang.

A terrible sound was heard.

Both the old woman crying on the floor and the man who was dangling from the shelf were extremely surprised at the thunderous sound which suddenly resonated in the room.

The old man brandishing the broom was killed before he had the time to be surprised. The .44 bullet struck the side of his head, and his tall and thin body collapsed on his side. Fresh blood flowed out from his head and stained the floor.

The woman stood, as expressionless as ever, still holding in her right hand the revolver from which she fired the single shot.

"*Fuyaa,*" the old woman let out a strange sound, and crawled noisily towards the corpse. She lifted and hugged the body while being bathed with the blood flowing non-stop from its head. She shook her husband.

"*Aaaaaaaaaaaaaah! Aaaaaaaaaaaaah!*"

When she realized that no amount of thrashing would return her husband's life, the old woman raised a long and high-pitched scream. To one's ears, it sounded like a flute blowing through the forest.

The man, who has stopped wrecking the shelf, stood next to the woman who even now, still did not return the revolver to its place. He was about to speak with a puzzled face when,

"Ah!"

The old woman quickly stood up. Both of her hands and her chest were stained deep red, and a gentle smile graced her face.

"With this everything will be a mess. I have to clean up." As she said this, she took the other broom from the pillar.

"I have to clea——"

Bang.

The woman released a second bullet which hit the old woman's chest. Her small body blew up in a bizarre manner, hitting the pillar with a twirl before falling down on top of the old man's corpse.

"……"

The woman said nothing, and returned the revolver in its holster. Silence came back inside the log cabin.

The man who exaggeratedly covered his ears spoke, still shocked. "Master…. This is not like you."

The woman faced him. "What do you mean by 'not like me'?"

"Whatever the circumstances may have been, wasn't it too early to open fire? There's no merit in shooting down an opponent holding just a stick, you know."

The woman looked at the broom the old man was holding, which now lay on the floor.

"Look well at the tip of that broom without picking it up."

"……"

The man took a few steps and looked closely at the broom.

"There's a small hole."

"Now, lift it up slowly and carefully, and swing it down the wall on the other side," said the woman. The man, who was puzzled all the more, swung the broom down with a whiff using his left hand.

Whoosh. Thump.

Something was released with full force from the tip and stuck to the wall. The surprised man approached the wall and saw a big fish hook piercing it.

"Eh?" He let out a surprised voice. The man turned around and the woman spoke to him,

"It's probably poisoned so be careful not to touch it."

"……"

The man's expression hardened for a while. He looked at the two corpses on the dust cloth ruined with blood stains. Then suddenly, he put his left hand's fingers inside his mouth. The woman saw this and spoke.

"It's too late to throw it up, but don't worry."

"But…" The man removed his fingers from his mouth and turned around.

"There was nothing especially strange in the cups. If the antidotes were ineffective, both of us… no, all four of us would be dead from poisoning by now," the woman explained nonchalantly. The man dropped his tense shoulders.

"…. I knew it. I have lost to you again, Master," the man said with a smile. The woman only replied in a tone neither amused nor angry,

"Women are brave."

—

"Well, let's start," the woman said.

The two soon began to search for something inside the room. They opened and investigated inside the ruined furniture, boxes and dresser. They searched underneath and on the lining of the table, inside the kitchen shelves, and checked for openings in the floorboards. They also investigated the blood-stained floor beneath the corpses.

When they finished probing the room, the two separated and started to search the other rooms of the log cabin.

Some time has passed since they began to search.

The woman was carefully inspecting all of the clothes in the bedroom dresser when she suddenly heard the man's voice.

"Master! Master!"

The woman went out of the bedroom and headed towards the direction of the voice.

She joined up with the man who was in the corridor between the log cabin and the box that used to be a car. The man was a little excited.

"Master!"

"Did you find something?"

"Yes… but…"

"But?"

"I found something completely different from what we were looking for. Besides that, I feel like throwing up again…"

The woman let out a curious expression, and asked where the place is.

The man silently proceeded through the corridor and opened a wooden door.

The door of the box, that is.

—

"I see… Indeed, this is completely different from what we were looking for," said the woman. 'Isn't it?' said the man behind her said in a small voice.

The square box was like a long and narrow corridor. Light came in as the man opened the window in the roof. Inside were the 'various things' the old couple made — the 'things they made using ingredients from nature'.

The first noticeable thing was a leg dangling from the ceiling. It was the smoked leg of a human, suspended with a hook from the thigh. Two pieces were dangling from the ceiling, neatly and equally spaced.

Skin was stretched over one surface of the wall without leaving a single gap. One can ascertain that it was a human's, judging from the form of the navel and the nipples. It was stretched from the wrists, and circular patterns were drawn on it.

Pierced on the tip of an upright pole was a dried head with the eyes and mouth stitched up, reminiscent of the practice of old tribes that existed a long time ago. The head has shrunk very much compared to its original size. The hair on its head was carefully braided.

There was a sofa. It was a sofa for two, with wooden legs. However, human bones were glued all around it as decoration. The seat and the back of the sofa were all made from human hide. Above the back seat, four stuffed heads of humans were lined up — heads of two men and two women, alternating with each other. They were positioned in a way so that if two people were to sit on the sofa, all of their cheeks would touch together. From behind, it would look as if six people who get along well with each other were sitting side by side.

There was a pelt on the floor right in front of the sofa. The skin of the head and the entire body was peeled off all at once, and it looked much like a tiger or a bear pelt. But it was undeniably a human's. It seemed as if it belonged to a big man.

There was a small round table. Its four legs were human legs. Lined up on top of it were two bowls cut up from skulls and forks made of finger bones.

There was a wooden shelf in the interior, above which were several important-looking big glass jars. Inside was some fluid and small heads. All were children's. They were looking at the woman with their clouded, gaping eyes. The mouths were open and their tongues were sticking out. Thick fish hooks were piercing the tips. In another bottle, there were only the eyeballs of several people. There were so many that there was not enough space in between them. Upon closer inspection, ears were attached to the edge of the shelf.

"'Fun', eh…?" The man behind the woman remembered the old man's words, and said this, looking like he was about to throw up.

"I see."

The woman then started to investigate the room. She moved the furniture, peeling off the skin in the process. The man watched from the entrance with a disgusted expression as she explored the room with much enthusiasm.

She came back to the entrance when she was done.

"In any case, it seems like there are only corpses in this room," the woman said without delay.

"Master… Don't you find this sickening at all?"

"Corpses can't attack, you know."

"Well, that's true but…."

The woman looked towards the room once more. " They killed a number of travelers. They must have collected the precious gold and silver they were holding somewhere. Look thoroughly. We came here for that."

"Okay… But would we continue to search even in the night?"

The woman headed to the log cabin.

"Yeah. Let's stay here for tonight."

"Ugh…"

The man who was left behind took one more look inside the box. He met the eyes of a girl inside the glass

jar. After waving his hand lightly towards the child, he turned away,

"Hmm?"

And looked back once more.

"You search over there."

The woman was searching the bedroom with about as much sense of shame as a burglar, and spoke to the man as he came in. As he was told, the man started to inspect the shelf beside the bed. The bed and the shelves were neatly crafted from wood, and would probably fetch good prices if sold but,

"Of course, we can't take this with us," the man said.

The two silently continued to search the bedroom. The man tapped the floorboards to see if there was space underneath, and when there was a portion that seemed

hollow, he put his head in and looked underneath the floor. He lifted his face and shook his head.

"Let's go to the next room," the woman said.

When she was about to go out into the corridor with the man,

'Thank you.'

She heard a voice. The woman asked, "Did you say something?"

"Hmm? Nope."

'Thank you.'

Again, the voice came, and the woman stopped in her tracks.

'Thank you.' 'Thank you.' 'Thank you.' 'Thank you.' 'Thank you.' 'Thank you.' 'Thank you.' 'Thank you.' 'Thank you.' 'Thank you.' 'Thank you.' 'Thank you.' 'Thank you.' 'Thank you.' 'Thank you.' 'Thank you.'

The voices were heard one after the other.

It was like the rubbing sound made by leaves when a slightly strong wind blows through a forest. One would not be able to tell where specifically in the surrounding area the voices — the overlapping sounds of various people's *'Thank you'*s —were coming from.

"What was that? A phonograph?" the woman turned around and asked the man, but the man only shrugged his shoulders.

"Ah—, the *'mata'*…? That sound is not from a phonograph. It's a *'mata'*. I *felt* it earlier too, you know."

"What do you mean by *'mata'*[8]?" the woman asked the man, slightly confused.

The man became hesitant for a moment, then finally spoke awkwardly, "Apparitions. Spirits. Ghosts. I've often heard and seen them since I was a child. I'm sure that the murdered travelers were expressing their gratitude. Ah, but that's rare. You can hear them too, Master——, Master?"

In the middle of his explanation, the woman turned towards the other direction. He called out to the woman whose back quickly got smaller as she walked away.

"Hey?"

With quick strides, the woman passed through the living room containing the corpses, came out of the entrance lined up with the pretty potted flowers, and went outside, where the early summer sun was shining brightly.

"Master…?"

The man followed her out in confusion, and with a puzzled expression, faced the woman who was now sitting in the driver's seat of the car.

The woman looked at the man sternly. "We're leaving."

"Eh? Eeeh? ——What about the treasure?"

"With this, travelers will no longer be attacked. That's good enough. Moreover, we may not be able to find anything when it's already night. Their purpose was probably to play with the dead bodies, so they might have thrown away the valuables."

The man had a curious expression as he sat in the passenger's seat. The small car shook.

"Well, that's fine but… Master, don't tell me you're——"

"It's nothing like that at all!"

The man asked, and the woman, with a cold face, declared with finality. She started the engine.

"Okay but…," the man muttered and thought for a moment. "But, what are we going to do with this fellow who attached himself on my back?" the man asked. The woman, without changing expression, extracted the revolver from her right hip. The man did not see her do this and continued to speak.

"This guy probably wants to go with us——"

Bang.

The woman shot the space behind the man without warning, shattering the rear glass of the car in an instant.

"Eek!" The man's right ear received the full thunderous echo of the shot, and twisted his body.

"……"

With eyes wide open, the woman in the driver's seat asked the man who was staring at her, "Where is he?"[9]

"Ah…, he d-disappeared… I think…"

"I see. Then, let's go."

The woman hit the gears, and set the car off. The car climbed the slope and disappeared from view in no time.

Inside a forest, a small river was flowing.

Near this river was a house.

It was a well-made log cabin surrounded by fields and greenery. On its high entrance made of planks, pretty flowers were blooming inside a number of plant pots. One of the pots received a direct hit from a .44 caliber bullet, and the pot fragments and soil were scattered about.

There was something glittering amidst the brown splinters and black soil.

Lots of pretty jewels rolled down from the entrance of the deserted house, glittering as the early summer sun bathed them with light.

“Land of Liars” —Waiting For You—

Chapter Six

"Land of Liars"

— Waiting For You —

In the country where Kino and Hermes arrived in, there was only one gate that they could use.

They were told that the western gate was not approved for use by travelers, so they headed to the southern side using the road beside the walls. They requested a three-day stay from the gate sentry and were given a permit.

Kino pushed Hermes through the open gates.

Right after passing through the gates, they came out to a stretch of forest with thick trees lined up in a disorderly manner.

The ground and the single road were covered with fallen leaves, most of which were autumn foliage. The leaves, as well as Kino's coat, shook as a cold wind blew.

When Kino was about to start Hermes' engine, a lone man came running from the forest.

The man looked around thirty, and was wearing a thick vest for indoor use over a thin shirt. He looked at Kino, exchanged glances, and then put on a slightly dejected expression.

"What's that about?" Hermes asked. Kino answered that she had no idea.

He walked towards Kino, his hands clasped together in front of him.

"Hey, miss traveler. Did you happen to meet my lover somewhere? Did she ask something about me? Did she leave any message for me?" the man asked.

Kino shook her head.

"Is that so…. You see, for some reason, my lover just up and disappeared from this country on a journey five years ago. However, she left word for me to wait for her because she's definitely going to come back. I've been waiting forever," the man spoke on his own accord without waiting to be asked. At that moment, a woman wearing an apron came running from behind. She had short hair and was about the same age as the man. She was carrying a warm-looking coat in her hands.

The woman spoke as she draped the coat around the man. "You will catch colds if you go out dressed like that . The weather's already cold."

"Ah, yes. I'm sorry. But I thought my lover has already come back. Too bad, it was a different person yet again," the man said while inserting his hands into the sleeves of the coat.

'Kino, look,' Hermes said, and urged Kino to look into the forest. There was a single house surrounded by trees.

"Does everyone in this country live inside the forest?" Kino asked.

"No. Everyone lives in a town further north," the man answered.

"This person is my housekeeper. She's a hard worker so I don't have to do a thing in the house and I could wait for my lover every day. She's such a great help," he said, and then sneezed loudly.

"See what I mean? Now, let's go back," the housekeeper said kindly.

The man asked the housekeeper, "Not yet? I wonder… when would she come home?"

"I'm sure she would someday. Now, let's go," the housekeeper gently pushed the back of the man, and they turned away.

Shortly, the man turned back to Kino. "Miss traveler, don't you really know? You really haven't seen my lover ? You're not trying to hide it from me now, are you?"

Kino shook her head once more.

"I see…"

The man dropped his shoulders, heartbroken, and walked towards the house. With a loud voice, the housekeeper told him to be careful not to fall over.

Then she whispered to Kino in a serious tone, "I'm really very sorry, miss traveler. He's a bit strange. Whatever he asks you, it's better if you tell him that you don't know anything."

"I see," Kino said.

She then spoke gently, "Well, I should get going. Ah, if you're going to the country's center, you should go straight through here. The road is pretty bad, so be careful."

Kino thanked her in return.

While looking at the backs of the pair returning into the forest, she started Hermes' engine.

—

The next day.

Small drops of cold rain were falling down since morning.

Kino put up her coat's collar and went around the town to take care of her traveling necessities. Afterwards, she decided to have lunch in a big cafeteria. Kino entered the shop pushing Hermes along, and parked him by the exit near the table where she was sitting.

A person talked to her, telling her that it was rare for travelers to come to their country. While Kino was leisurely drinking her tea, the residents gathered and surrounded her table to talk to her.

When she was asked whether there was anything she would like to know,

"We met a man living in the forest by the walls. What' s up with him?" Hermes asked.

Everyone's faces turned pale. They became quiet, and their faces took on gloomy expressions. The atmosphere of the place suddenly became serious and depressing.

After a while, someone spoke. "Um, you see… we really feel sorry for that person."

Everyone silently nodded.

"I believe I have a say about this matter," a man around thirty spoke. He asked for permission to change seats with a person, and sat in front of Kino.

"Good day, miss traveler. Over ten years ago, I was good friends with that person. Right now, I work for the government," he started to speak with a sad expression on his face.

With a gentle tone, he told her that until five years ago, this country was ruled by an oppressive king, and that there was a revolution to overthrow him.

"During that time, both of us were members of the police force. He was smart, skillful and a man of good character, and became a key person in the uprising. He was made leader of a unit assigned to break into the palace and assassinate the royal family. I was under his command," the man said.

"He had a lover. It was a daughter of a farming family who lived at the outskirts of the country. He first met her when she came to town to sell vegetables. I was with him at that time…. It was one year before the revolution. She was a very beautiful woman with long hair. Everything went well between them, but they never got married. However…," the man cut short his words, and took one big breath.

"The revolution drew near. I asked him what he planned to do about her when that time comes. He couldn't give me an answer…. Soon we were told that the date and time of our attack has been decided. Only then would he let her know about their parting. We might die, but he couldn't tell her what it is that we are going to do. It seems she parted with him against her will . The only thing he said to me was that he told her a 'lie' …"

"I see. But the revolution was a success, wasn't it?" Kino said, and the man nodded.

"We broke into the palace after beating down the guards. We found the car the king's family was trying to escape with, and attacked it. While my comrades and I provided back-up, he closed in upon them and threw a bomb into the car. It blew up magnificently. You wouldn' t find a more heroic man anywhere."

"And then?" Hermes asked from behind. The man continued, his face grief-stricken.

"And then we saw it…"

"Saw what?"

"The vehicle smashed into pieces, and inside, the sloppy remains of what used to be the king's family — the king and queen, the two princes, and the princess. While everyone raised cheers of victory, we saw it. The dress the princess was wearing and the head that was blown off —— they belonged to his lover."

"What?"

"The princess came to town in the guise of a farmer's daughter… and induced a romantic relationship with him…. No one realized it…. He screamed like a crazy man."

"Then you mean that man's lover is already dead?" Kino asked. The man and all the people around nodded.

"He couldn't endure the fact that he fell in love with the princess he was supposed to hate, and that he killed her with his own hands. He ignored reality and fell completely out of his mind. The truth is, since he was a hero, he would have been placed in an important position in the new government. However, he talked in delirium in the hospital, asking over and over again, ' Where did she go?' The doctor who was looking after him told him a lie: 'Your lover has gone in a journey

somewhere. But she told me that she would definitely come home, so wait for her, okay?' In this country, ordinary people are not allowed to go beyond the walls. He didn't even realize that obvious fact. He said, 'Then, I' ll wait for her.' and started to live in the forest…. Five years have passed since then," the man continued.

"The government decided to provide him with an annual pension until his death. They built a house for him and hired someone to look after him. However, no one lasted with this sort of job. Life in the forest was so inconvenient. Moreover, it was heartbreaking, having to lie to him every single time. Everybody quit after a while …. We couldn't blame them."

"Then what about his housekeeper now?" Kino asked.

"Like you, miss traveler, she came from outside the country. Three years ago, when my subordinate and I were out for reconnaissance, we found travelers collapsed and on the verge of death near the walls. Some of these travelers immigrated. I thought it was a good thing that foreigners don't know much about our circumstances, and we decided to hire her. She has been doing a good job ever since."

"I see…"

"And it looks like she's going to continue with her good work. There were no indications at all that he would get better. It might be better for him though…," the man said with a dry smile.

A middle-aged woman standing behind gently continued.

"That's why we all lie to our hero, and will continue doing so. That person will wait forever for his lover who will never come back."

—

The next day, that is, the morning of the third day since Kino entered the country.

The weather was good. After breakfast, Kino made her arrangements and left towards the southern gate.

Kino carefully rode Hermes through the muddy forest road.

Soon they noticed a small horse carriage stranded in the mud. Aboard it was the man's housekeeper.

"Kino, it's your turn."

"It can't be helped. Well, soon we will be dirty all over anyway."

With her boots covered in mud, Kino helped the carriage to escape. And then they rode together to the gates.

The housekeeper thanked them when they arrived before the gates. Then, Hermes told her that they learned about the previous day's circumstances.

"Is that so…"

When Kino and Hermes were about to head to the gates, the housekeeper called out to them.

"Wait! I'd like to show you my gratitude. How about some tea? You can also wash your feet."

—

Kino and Hermes were guided to the log house in the forest. The man was above the roof, mending it. The housekeeper told him that Kino helped her, and asked permission to let them in. The man gave his consent without a second thought.

After washing her boots and Hermes' tires by a well, they were guided to a spacious room. When the man returned, the woman has already prepared tea. Steam rose appealingly from the cups lined up on the table.

"It has an interesting aroma, what kind of tea is this?" Kino asked.

"I have no idea, but it's very delicious," the man said and took his share from the side and began to drink it. He drank slowly,

"It's delicious," and said this to Kino with a smile. Kino also drank. She told him that it was good.

"Hey," the man spoke to Kino and Hermes. "Miss traveler, you must be going to various places from here, right? If ever you happen to meet her——"

"Sure. We'll tell her about you. That you've been waiting."

"Yes, please do," the man laughed happily.

"Oh my," the woman who came holding biscuits suddenly cried out.

"Maybe someone arrived again at the gates? I think I heard the sound of an engine just now."

The man stopped drinking his tea and stood up.

"I-it might be her! I'll go!"

The housekeeper was flustered, and spoke to the man, "Please don't forget to wear your coat!"

'I know!' the man said, but came out of the house without wearing his coat.

When the sound of a door closing was heard, the housekeeper sat down. She placed a warm-looking lap blanket on her knees, and soothingly drank her own tea.

“Is this really okay?” Hermes suddenly asked, and continued, “I didn’t hear anything like the sound of an engine.”

“Yes. If he were here, I wouldn’t be able to talk to you in peace. With this, he probably won’t be back for a while .”

Kino faced the housekeeper.

“It’s good enough as it is. My father, mother, and two siblings have safely escaped and are now happily living in a neighboring country. And as for me, I can stay by the side of the person I love,” the housekeeper said with a smile.

Kino slowly asked, “You are… this country’s former princess?”

The apron-clad woman silently nodded.

"I see, that's a good thing, indeed. Please continue," Hermes said.

Kino gazed into the woman's eyes. The woman raised her teacup, drank, and then returned it to its place. Then she opened her mouth to speak.

"I was born as this country's princess, and remained so until five years ago. I slipped into the people as a spy, and found out about the danger of an uprising. And later on, I met that person. Of course, I earned their trust to obtain information that I could report to my father. It is to learn the date of the planned attack beforehand, and escape to a neighboring country with our fortune."

"……"

"Uh-huh."

"But I, posing as a country girl, began to like him, and eventually fell in love with him. Except for my identity, nothing else was a lie in our relationship. Whenever possible, I would spend my time together with him. It was only a short time each day, but it was the most wonderful time of my life. Back then, I wished that those days would never end."

The woman smiled and then composed herself once again.

"But it came to an end. That person told me the final information I needed."

"It was when he parted with you without giving a reason, wasn't it? By then, you knew that the revolution will soon take place," Kino confirmed.

"Yes——. I conveyed that information to my father. I neither objected nor insisted to remain, and left the country together with my family. Our substitutes who were left behind carried out their duty, and everything went as planned. I forced myself to forget about him. I believed that we would never meet again."

"But you came back."

The woman nodded. "Being a spy, I learned many things while I was in the neighboring country. I wished with all my heart that he would not die in battle. That wish was granted. However, he was broken by the fact that he had killed 'me'. I also learned that they needed a person who would look after him…. I worried for a long time before I came up with this solution."

"I see," Hermes said. The woman suddenly smiled as if she was remembering something.

"But it was so hard. I had to convince my parents and become a traveler…. When I entered the country, I had to be employed as a housekeeper. Even now, my parents are asking me to return," the woman said, seemingly amused.

Kino asked, "What did he do when you met again?"

"He said this: 'Ah. Please take care of me until she returns.' —— it made me very happy."

"Really?" Hermes asked.

"Yes," the woman immediately nodded.

"He still loves me and waits for my return. And he needed me by his side. I lied to him when we met for the first time. And from here on, I will continue to lie to the person I love to stay with him. I am—— very happy."

"… Thank you for telling us your story."

"Yup, thanks."

Kino and Hermes said. Then they heard the door opening as the man returned to the house. The housekeeper stood up and greeted the man shivering from the cold.

"It was different. The sentry told me that it was just the power generator being moved…. Nobody came…"

"Is that so?"

The housekeeper pulled a chair for the man. She gently wrapped the man's shivering shoulders with the lap blanket she used earlier.

"When? I wonder when she would come home…," the man muttered to himself.

"I don't know when, but I'm sure she would come home someday," the woman said.

The man looked at her and asked, "I'm scared. Do you think it's possible that she has forgotten about me?"

The housekeeper's hand became still as she was preparing a fresh serving of tea, and slowly shook her head. She smiled and answered the same way as everyone else in the country.

"No. There's no way you will be forgotten… ever."

—

The two bid them farewell, and Kino and Hermes passed through the gates.

"They're gone. Will they really send my message to her?" the man asked, and the housekeeper told him with a bright face that it will be fine.

The moment they were about to enter the house, the man cried out, "There's the sound of an engine! Someone has come again!"

Then he ran towards the gate.

"I'm sure that was just Hermes'——" The housekeeper stopped. She did not try to chase the man, and returned to the house.

She tidied up the cups on top of the table, and muttered to herself.

"Now, what would be great for lunch?"

—

"Kino, wait a bit. Look behind."

They were already outside the country, a bit ways off the gates.

The engine has finished warming up, and Kino was about to straddle Hermes when he spoke. Kino looked back and saw the man trying to go out from the gates. The sentries were trying to stop him while he was desperately trying to say something. Eventually the sentries gave up and released him.

The man, who was now wearing a coat, ran at full speed towards where Kino is.

"Miss traveler! Please wait! There's something I would like to tell you!" the man shouted. He was facing the ground, breathing roughly.

"There's something I would like to tell you," the man repeated, still looking below.

"You want me to send a message to your lover?" Kino asked and the man raised his face.

"No. I have a message for you. There's just one last thing I want you to know."

Kino looked up at the man who stretched to his full height. She looked at his cold face.

"It's good enough as it is. I am happy. I don't want to break anything anymore. Not the life of my friend who served as a spy to the royal family, not the memories of the people who did not know a thing, nor the revolution's success and the new country's system. And above all, not the life I have now with the person I love the most. —— I don't want to destroy things as they are now. It's good enough as it is."

"……. You are…," Kino stammered.

"A liar. Every single person in this country is a liar," Hermes said.

The man smiled happily and made several small nods.

"Goodbye, I'm returning now," the man said.

"Goodbye. Stay healthy, both of you."

"Bye-bye, mister hero. Give my regards to your housekeeper."

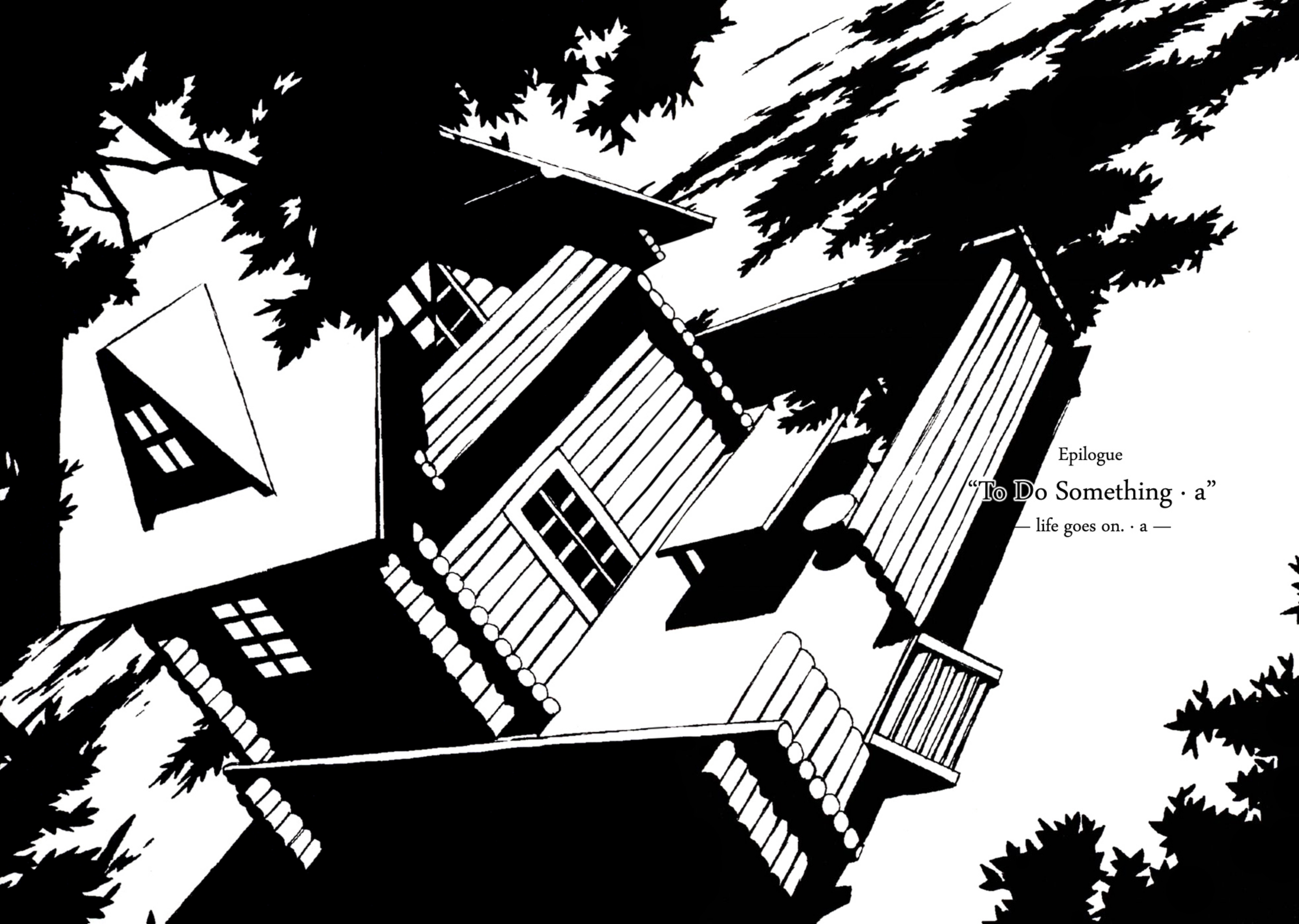
Kino and Hermes looked on as the man returned to his country. The worried-looking sentries met him and together, they passed through the gates.

When they were gone, Kino spoke.

"Shall we go?"

Hermes answered, "Yeah."

“To Do Something · a” —life goes on. a—



Epilogue

“To Do Something · a”

— life goes on. · a —

There was a forest and a road.

The forest was spread over totally flat ground as far as the eyes could see. Trees of different sorts were growing luxuriantly, and harmoniously blended with each other.

The straight road was going through the forest, as if dividing it into two parts; a single brown line among many shades of green. It was a pretty narrow, earthy road — a car and a carriage could barely pass each other in it.

In this forest, there was a field and a house on the side of the road.

The long and narrow field was planted along one side of the road. On all four sides, the field was surrounded by well-defined straight lines of tall trees. One half of it was nothing but soil, and on the other half were ridges with planted spinach. And a little further, on the other side of this field, a log house was standing.

This log house had a single pair of double doors that led inside and largish windows across the perimeter. In front of the entrance and beside the windows at the opposite side, there was a terrace built of thick boards. A

small stable was standing near the house, but now there wasn't a single horse in there.

Someone vigorously opened one of the windows, then the adjacent ones.

When all the windows had been opened, a hand appeared and started putting props. Finally the front door swung open and a girl came out.

She was in her early teens, slightly taller than an average teenager. Her below-shoulder length hair was tied back in a ponytail. She was wearing lace-up boots and light brown pants that were quite big, so they were rolled up several times. A green cotton jacket was slipped over her white shirt.

The girl was carrying a single sheet under her arm. She hanged it on a rope that was stretched on the terrace near the entrance, and fixed it with wooden clothespins on both ends. The drying sheet was lightly swayed by the wind.

Then this girl lifted up both hands and stretched herself. The forest was thinned where the field and the house were located. She gazed at the blue sky spread over this place.

The morning sky visible through the foliage was cloudless and crystal-clear. A beam of light, which just emerged from the horizon, was being shattered into pieces by multiple tree trunks.

The chirping of all sorts of birds was heard from everywhere as if surrounding her.

"Yeah. The weather is good today," said the girl with a smile.

She entered the house and this time came out with a motorrad (Note: A two-wheeled vehicle. Only to note that it cannot fly). A carrier was fixed above its rear wheel and black boxes were installed on both sides of it.

The girl started pushing the motorrad to the terrace. The width of the entrance was just enough for a person with a motorrad to pass through. On the way, the motorrad shook once towards the girl, but she hurriedly recovered balance.

"Uh…"

The girl put the motorrad on its center stand on the terrace and let out a sigh. And then:

"Get up! It's morning!"

She started hitting the motorrad with clenched fists and yelled. It continued for a while, but soon:

"Huh? Uh… Yeah, yeah—— Morning," said the motorrad.

The girl stopped hitting it and the motorrad said reproachfully:

"Hey, can't you wake me up more politely? To be beaten every time——"

"The weather is good."

"Do you hear me?"

"I do. But it's your fault since you can't wake up no matter how much I call you and yell at you," the girl answered cheerfully.

"Good morning, Hermes," she greeted the motorrad.

The motorrad called Hermes answered the girl:

"Good morning, Kino."

The girl named Kino softly nodded. She turned to the house entrance, and her long hair swayed in the wind. With a smile, she addressed an old woman who came out of the house:

"Good morning, Master."

"Morning. The weather is quite good today, isn't it?"

The old woman, carrying a sheet under her arm, looked at the sky, and said the same thing to the girl in a calm tone.

She seemed fragile, but at the same time, her back was straight. Her gray hair was tied back. She was wearing a light green cardigan over slim pants and a white shirt. There was something similar to a small leather pouch attached to the belt behind her back. It was catching the hem of the cardigan.

But it wasn't a pouch; it was a holster with a cover. The grip of a small-sized high caliber hand persuader (Note: A persuader is a gun. In this case, a pistol) was sticking out of the holster, which was placed in such way that it would be easy to pull it out with the right hand. It was a revolver with a short barrel.

The old woman, who was drying sheets, asked the girl:

"What were our plans for such a lovely day again?"

"We were going to cut down a tree in the forest. The gunpowder seller will come early in the afternoon, so we have to get everything ready. After that, there's nothing else in particular," answered the girl.

The old woman gave a satisfied nod.

"Yes, of course.—— Well, in that case let's cut the tree in the afternoon. Until then, let's do your shooting training after breakfast."

The girl agreed and then asked:

"Should I make breakfast again?"

The old woman answered this question with a smile — an observant eye would have noticed that it was a slightly taut smile:

"No, I'll do it myself.—— This is my everyday pleasure."

"Seems like you really like to cook!" the girl said joyfully.

—

Right after entering the log house through the front door, one will find himself in a living room. In the center, there was a small table made of lengthwise-cut logs, and three chairs. A corner of the room was carpeted with bricks; a steel wood-burning stove was installed above them. A stovepipe attached to its side extended to the outer wall.

The girl quickly put some logs in the stove, lighted a match and kindled the fire with a thin piece of wood. She looked at the smoothly flaring fire and closed the stove door.

The girl turned around; right before her eyes was a coat.

The long brown coat was hanging on the wall in the living room, ready for use for a person heading outside.

"……"

The girl gazed at it silently for a while.

Then she headed out to call the old woman.

A small table has been carried out to the terrace. It was pretty wide, made of wood, and had folded legs. A gleaming black hand persuader, exposed to the sun high above the forest, was lying atop of it. It was a slim high caliber revolver with a long barrel. A paper box with bullets carelessly put in it was lying near the persuader, and there was a small bottle filled with green liquid gunpowder as well as other wooden boxes containing cleaning equipment and various accessories.

On the opposite side of the road, a thick plank was placed horizontally between two trees pretty high above the ground. A small rusted frying pan, tied to the plank with a sturdy string, was hanging down from it.

The girl, standing beside the table, took the revolver. It felt slightly heavy, but she tightly held it up. She looked at it from the side and confirmed that it wasn't loaded. After that she raised the hammer and pulled the trigger and then pulled the hammer back. She repeated it several times to check that it was functioning well.

"I'm going to insert the bullets," said the girl.

The old woman replied from behind, "Yes, please."

Hermes was standing at the center stand behind her; the two sheets were being swayed slightly by the wind a little further from him.

The girl half-raised the revolver's hammer with a finger of her right hand and placed the revolver's body into her left hand. Using a syringe, she injected green liquid gunpowder into the front of the cylinder chamber, in other words, the hole in the rotating part. Rotating the cylinder with her left hand finger, she injected gunpowder in all six chambers.

The old woman said calmly from behind:

"Of course, if you insert too much gunpowder, it will increase the burst power, but it will also greatly increase

recoil. I think the current amount is just enough for now. You can slowly increase the amount, once you've gotten used to it. In case you injected too much, by no means fire a second shot. You should keep that in mind."

The girl replied that she understood. Next she stuffed a felt patch in one hole and inserted a .44 caliber bullet inside. She bent towards her the lever under the barrel, and using the connected rod, pushed the bullet inside. She repeated the same process for all six bullets. Finally, she inserted her finger into a grease can and applied it to all the holes, as if making lids. After that she properly cleaned her finger with a rag, and placed small percussion caps one by one at the back of the cylinder, at the place hit by the hammer.

It took some time, but in the end the revolver was fully loaded and ready.

The girl gently laid the revolver on the table; its barrel was pointing at the opposite direction.

"I've made the preparations. There's no one on the road, is it alright to shoot?"

The girl asked the old woman without turning around.

"You've forgotten again."

The old woman took out two cotton pieces from her pocket and approached the girl. She inserted it in the girl's ears.

"Ah, yes. Thank you."

The girl laughed awkwardly, facing the same direction. The old woman also inserted earplugs.

"Now you can shoot."

The girl slowly raised the revolver, her right hand's index finger stretched. Then she added her left hand, as if rolling around the right one, and started stretching both arms. She fully stretched her right hand, while her left one was slightly tightened. She stepped back a little with her right leg, positioned her body diagonally and her face dead straight.

She aimed exactly at the frying pan. With her left hand's index finger, she raised the hammer. The cylinder rotated slightly, positioning the hole and the barrel on a straight line. And then, she pulled the trigger with her right hand's index finger.

Bang.

A white smoke spread at the same time as the heavy roaring sound was heard. The revolver and the girl's hand sprang up. In a moment, a spark was emitted and the frying pan started spinning with furious speed. It was spinning to the left, twisting the string.

One more roaring sound. The frying pan suddenly stopped spinning. The second bullet hit the opposite side of the pan, thus negating the pan's movement.

The third bullet hit the center of the frying pan, sending it to the back. The pan moved forward like a swing. The fourth bullet forcibly stopped this movement. The fifth bullet pushed the pan back once again. It swung back, then forth. Half-way back, it was hit by the sixth bullet.

Getting extreme acceleration, the frying pan rotated by 180 degrees. When it was above the plank, it started falling, hitting the plank and falling forward.

Trying to return the frying pan's string, which made a full circle, to its original position, the girl stretched her hands and threw up the pan, but it came back, so she tried again.

The girl looked at the frying pan that wasn't moving as expected, and frowned.

She made another attempt, but failed once again.

The old woman, her arms folded, gazed at this scene from the terrace. The motorrad asked from behind:

"How was it?"

The old woman quickly glanced back at the motorrad, but instantly turned around.

"As usual."

"I see."

"This child shoots the same way she did for the first time——"

The woman made a pause and breathed out.

"She is talented. It seems that there are, after all, people who have natural shooting skills since birth. It doesn't depend on a person's gender or age. Compared to those who are really hooked with persuaders, there's a much greater number from those who don't like them that become very skilled. How ironic."

The girl jumped and threw the pan upwards with both hands, but it hit the top of the plank and returned back. She hastily stepped back to avoid being struck by the pan , which was full of cavities.

"If you're called "Master", then does that mean there are some skillful disciples of yours out there?" asked Hermes.

"Yes, there are. Well, it's worth teaching. The more you teach, the more skillful you become."

"I wish the same could be applied to driving a motorrad."

"It depends on you. You should practice more. But——"

"But?"

The old woman was still showing her back to the motorrad.

"'If you are a skillful driver, it doesn't mean you can win a race', right? In the long run, this is what you should worry about."

Hermes fell silent for a moment and then asked:

"So, 'if you are a skillful marksman, it doesn't mean you can survive a duel or a death fight'?"

The old woman turned around.

"You are quite perceptive. What if I teach you how to shoot? I can attach a weapon to your lights or exhaust pipe, how about that?"

"No, thank you," said Hermes.

The woman looked forward and said in calm tone:

"If you live in a safe country, you shouldn't hesitate to make compromises when you have to cooperate with other people. In much the same way, if you want to survive in this dangerous world, you shouldn't hesitate to shoot a person."

"Have you told her this?"

"No, and even if I tell, no one would completely understand that. On the contrary, at ordinary times a person would ask himself 'what does this mean?', and at a critical moment this thought will just plague you.——So I keep this thought to myself."

When the old woman stopped talking, the girl returned back to the terrace with quick steps.

"Master, can I shoot one more time?" she asked.

The old woman nodded with a smile.

—

"It's the only thing that I can't teach her," said the old woman.

The sun was pretty high and the air was warm. Hermes was standing beside the house with his engine

running; the sound from the exhaust pipe resounded through the forest. The girl was standing near him. She was wearing a thick brown leather jacket, a leather riding helmet and a small windbreak goggles. A pair of gloves tightly covered her hands; her knees were wrapped with old bandages made of thick felt.

"I rode something like this long ago. But I'm not sure if I can still do it now," said the old woman.

"What were you like at that time, when you were traveling?" asked the girl, and then continued with a smile:

"I bet you were the same kind person as you're now!"

For some time it was silent except for humming of the engine. The blue sky and the green forest.

And then:

"Yeah, probably," the woman said seriously.

The girl slightly opened Hermes' throttle.

"Is it enough, Hermes?"

Hermes answered:

“Yes. Well, drive slowly at first. Today it’s alright to slowly increase the speed, step by step. You should practice how to drive fast and stop quickly.”

“Understood.”

The girl straddled the motorrad and removed side stand with her left leg.

“Well then, let’s go!”

She started driving on the earthy road, slowly at first, as Hermes told her to.

The old woman watched this. Right in front of her eyes , the sound of the motorrad’s engine suddenly became louder.

“Hey, don’t speed up so abruptly!”

Leaving behind Hermes’ screams, the motorrad disappeared in the cloud of dust raised by the rear wheel .

The old woman put out a deck chair on the terrace. While she was sitting there and leisurely gazing at the sky, the girl on the motorrad came back with a loud roar. There wasn't a single dirty spot on her jacket.

The girl abruptly hit the brakes on the road in front of the house. Fixing the rear wheel, she slid the motorrad to the side and stopped. The clouds of dust one again danced in the air, but in a moment they were moved away by the wind.

"One more time?" asked the girl.

Hermes immediately replied that it was enough for that day.

"Alright. Thank you," said the girl and turned off the engine. Stillness immediately returned to the vicinity.

The girl pushed Hermes towards the house. She stopped beside the terrace and put the motorrad on its center stand.

"I'll wash you now," said the girl. Hermes thanked her with a tired voice.

The old woman asked the girl to change clothes. The girl answered her in lively voice and went to the house.

"So how was it? ——Is it worth teaching?" the old woman asked Hermes.

"Please change."

"I won't."

The wind blew on the terrace and swayed the two sheets.

—

"Well, um…, you're pretty good at speeding and stopping. This time let's practice bringing me down and lifting me up," said Hermes.

The girl took off her leather jacket and put on the green cotton jacket. To put it simply, she was wearing the same clothes as in the morning, except for the gloves. The sun was at its almost highest point; its light reflected on Hermes' tank.

"Alright, what should I do?" the girl said.

"First of all let's move a little — to the ground on the right side," instructed Hermes.

The girl started pushing him to the edge of the field, holding the handle from the left. Compared to the road, the ground there was softer, although the tires didn't sink too much in it. There was no need to worry about hitting the motorrad's body, unlike on the terrace.

"Yeah, this place is fine. —— Regardless of time and place, if you aren't able to get up the motorrad by yourself, you can't ride it. Usually this is practiced before actual driving. That's why we are holding the training in such a place. You should learn to lift me up from the left and from the right."

"I understand. Let's start the practice."

"Alright. First try to bring me down."

"Okay," replied the girl and let go of the handle. Then she pushed the motorrad to the right.

"Huh? ——Wha—! Hey!"

Hermes fell down under its own weight. The tip of the handle sank into the ground.

"Done," said the girl.

"You should do it slowly!" yelled Hermes.

—

The girl practiced picking Hermes up from both sides several times.

She brought him down gently, then lifted him up and put down the stand. When she was picking him up from

right to left, she lowered the side stand on the left with her hand in advance, so that it won't fall to the left after it was lifted.

"You're becoming quite good at this. More composed. Later we should practice this on a slope," said Hermes.

As Kino was wiping her sweat, the old woman called out from the terrace:

"It's ready. Let's have a lunch."

"Alright! I'm coming," the girl replied cheerfully, turning around.

Hermes, who at that moment was lying on its left side, spoke to the girl frantically.

"Well, I think it's quite obvious that you should get me up before leaving. Hey, don't leave me like this. —— I beg you!"

—

"I bet there are really tall trees at the boundary between the field and the forest. Let's go there after lunch. We could use it as firewood later," said the old woman.

The old woman and the girl were sitting face to face at the table, which they brought to the terrace, and were having a meal under the blue sky.

Two sets of aluminum plates, mugs, and high pots were lying on the table.

A plate was divided in three parts — a rather thick ham steak in blueberry sauce was lying in front, baked potatoes were in the center to the left, and to the right was a boiled carrot. The old woman cut the carrot in small pieces with a grayed knife that seemed to be used in assassinations or hand-to-hand fights, but definitely didn't look like a dining knife. She put a piece of carrot into her mouth with a silver fork in her left hand.

The girl poured some tea from the pot into her mug and asked the old woman.

"Will we be using a saw to cut the tree, or will a woodcutter cut it with an axe?"

The woman slightly shook her head.

"No. It's not an easy task to cut down a tall and thick tree. It's dangerous, so you have to think about the direction of the fall. To put it simply, we'll use an electric saw."

"Do we have such a thing?" the girl asked with a piece of ham in her fork.

"No," answered the old woman.

"?"

The girl put the ham in her mouth with a puzzled look .

Rat-a-tat-tat-tat-tat-tat-tat-tat-tat-tat-tat-tat——

An explosive sound roared through the forest.

It was the sound of shots fired from a persuader, but they were mixed together, so it was heard as a single prolonged sound.

The chips of wood started dancing nonstop at the bottom of the trunk of a tall tree. The holes began to appear on the side of the trunk with a crunching sound, as if a big, invisible beaver was nibbling at it. When the long sound stopped, the tree trunk had big bite marks on it.

A tripod was installed on the ground in front of the terrace, where the girl practiced not long ago. It was quite a big tripod constructed out of thick green pipes. The tripod was firmly placed in holes in the ground — one leg in front and two at the back. A fully automatic rapid-fire persuader was installed on top of it. It was aimed exactly at the tree.

A huge number of empty cartridges were scattered around a thick felt cloth that was spread between the tripod's legs. Several metal and wooden boxes were aligned near the tripod. The shovel, used to dig the holes, was sticking out from the ground nearby.

The old woman with ear buds in her ears was squatting behind the tripod. Looking through the sights installed beside it, she made fine adjustments to the persuader's aim using a dial and a lever on the back of the tripod.

Then the mixed explosive sounds were heard again. A storm of bullets passed through the field and pierced the opposite side of the trunk in the place that had bite marks, and the wood chips once again dashingly danced in the air.

Rat-a-tat-tat-tat-tat-tat-tat-tat! Rat-a-tat-tat-tat-tat! Rat-a-tat!

Almost at the same moment when the sound stopped, the tree started leaning to the side that it was initially shot at. The narrow trunk that was left slowly bent, then broke. The tall tree started falling down, scattering around its leaves.

The tree hit the ground and the neighborhood trembled with a low sound, the tree didn't spring off even once. And then, right on the boundary between the field and the forest, it fell sideways parallel to the field.

"……"

The girl gazed at this scene with eyes wide open and ears closed. Hermes was standing behind her on his center stand.

The sheets drying on the terrace earlier were put away and only a small towel was hanging there. Nearby, the two plates used earlier were also hanging by the small metal things attached to the hole in the plates. Several small, snow-white clouds appeared on the sky and were floating very slowly.

"Alright," the old woman muttered. A white smoke was curling upwards above the tripod from the heated fully automatic rapid-fire persuader. Under the tripod, a mountain of more than two hundred empty cartridges, fired in 10 seconds, was crumbling like a sand hill.

"Yes. It's done," said the old woman, removing her ear buds.

"Cool!" The girl was delighted.

"How unreasonable. ——Well, I suppose it's better than converting a motorrad's engine into chainsaw…," Hermes mumbled quietly while looking at them.

"Master, what will we do with this tree?"

The girl looked at the toppled tree, which still had leaves and branches.

"We'll leave it like that for some time."

The girl turned her surprised face to the old woman.

"We're just going to leave it?"

"Yes, that's right. In this case, the leaves will fall off the branches and the water inside the tree will come out. It will take some time, but later it will be completely dry and will become perfect lumber."

"Really?" the girl exclaimed looking at the tree.

"That's why there's no need to shoot anything else," the old woman said with a smile.

—

The old woman waited until the empty cartridges got colder and then scooped up a number of them with the shovel and placed them in the wooden box. The girl searched for cartridges that bounced away, gathered them all and put them in a box.

Lastly, the old woman covered the tripod and the persuader with waterproof cloth. After that, she returned to the house carrying a metal box to put away the unused bullets. The girl ascended the terrace.

"It's finished!"

"Good job," said Hermes.

"But I almost didn't do anything," the girl replied.

She leaned on the terrace and looked at the sky for a moment.

The gentle wind was blowing, shaking the girl's hair.

"……"

The blue sky spread far, far away beyond the increasing number of round clouds. The silently floating clouds created an illusion, as if the sky moved in the opposite direction.

—

"Kino?—— Kino."

The woman called out the girl from the house entrance .

But the girl just kept staring at the sky.

"She is calling you," the motorrad said in a rather loud voice. The girl lowered her gaze in surprise.

"Huh? Me?"

"Yes, you, Kino," the old woman said in a kind tone, standing in front of the girl.

"Uh, yeah, of course… Sorry, sometimes I still think that it's not me you are calling."

The girl felt embarrassed. She laughed, but wasn't distressed.

"——Plus, I have been thinking about 'Kino'…"

The smile disappeared from her lowered face. She looked at the floorboards at the old woman's feet.

The old woman lightly placed her hand on the girl's shoulder, and spoke to the girl who raised her face in surprise.

"You'll get used to it eventually.——I like the name ' Kino'. It's short, easy to pronounce and it sounds good."

"I think so too!" the girl replied in a lively voice.

"For me you are Kino.—— You are Kino."

"I am… Kino," the girl mumbled as if reciting. And then: "But! But, Master," said the girl, looking at the old woman, raising up her clenched fists and shaking them several times.

“I prefer to refer to myself using a male pronoun[10]. Don’t you think it suits me better? I’ve got a feeling, since the first time I’ve heard it, that it’s a perfect feat for me.”

“A perfect fit?” Hermes asked from the side.

“Yeah, that!” Kino answered instantly.

The old woman said in a calm tone:

“You’ll get used to it too. It’s impossible to change something all of a sudden. Go easy; like that tree, calmly waiting its time. The winter will pass, the spring will come——There’s plenty of time to think about it.”

—

“By the way, “Master” sounds kinda mysterious, is there a hidden meaning in it?” asked the girl.

The old woman holding a dry towel turned her face with a dubious look.

"What?"

"What is the meaning of "Master"? I've been thinking for a long time that it's pretty unusual. Ah, maybe it's an ordinary thing in a foreign country."

"……"

"……"

Hermes and the old woman kept silent for a while. A cool wind blew between the two people and motorrad.

The old woman gently folded the towel she was holding and said:

"Kino… Please sit at the table. I'll teach you various things."

"Huh?—— Alright."

Then the two disappeared inside the house.

Their conversation was unintelligible to Hermes, who was left on the terrace, but then:

"Really?!"

He heard the girl's surprised voice.

"So "Master" is not a name?!"

"Oh, my…," said Hermes.

Hermes, standing on the terrace in front of the small house, could hear the quiet sound of the wind and the two voices coming from inside the house.

"Let's have the afternoon tea."

"Okay, I'll make it. ——As you taught me."

"Alright, please do."

For some time a sound of fire kindling and water boiling was heard.

"Perhaps, they fell asleep," muttered Hermes.

"It's ready.——Please."

"Thank you. It smells nice. What tea did you make?"

"Um, I can't read, but it was from the red can. You've made it earlier and it was delicious."

"It's apple tea. Let's drink."

"Yes."

The number of clouds has increased even more; the joint clusters were floating on the sky.

"Tomorrow will be cloudy," Hermes talked to himself.

The old woman asked:

"If the weather tomorrow will also be good, what should we do?"

The girl answered immediately:

"We can air the bed mats!"

The sun started going down, and it was twice lower than its highest point.

The girl hit the motorrad with clenched fists and yelled .

“Get up!”

The motorrad gave a shout:

“Yeah-yeah… It’s morning, right?”

“Nope. The gunpowder seller is about to arrive, so I’ll move you aside,” said the girl.

She pushed Hermes and removed the stand. She kept pushing him slightly and then nimbly jumped onto him when the motorrad slid down the terrace. She drove with this force on the ground, then turned around and slid him between the road and the terrace.

“That’s really good. But you still need to change the way you wake me up,” said Hermes.

The girl stopped the motorrad.

Soon a carriage appeared from beyond the road. It was clearly visible in the distance since the road was absolutely straight. The old woman, who came out of the house, stood on the road and gazed at the distance.

"He is here."

"I'll make the preparations," said the girl and ran towards the stables near the house.

Soon a carriage pulled by a pair of horses stopped in front of the terrace. The coachman was a well-built, middle-aged man with long beard, wearing leather coat and overalls. He had two holsters with automatic persuaders inside them under his arms. The carriage carrier was loaded with a number of wooden boxes fixed with ropes.

"Good afternoon. Thank you for coming," said the old woman.

The man descended the carriage and gently lowered his head towards the woman.

—

Installing a plank diagonally between the carriage and the terrace, the man slid some of the cargo down the plank and lined them up on the terrace.

The girl put a manger beside the horses. In order to fill another tub with water, she hurriedly ran to the well behind the house with a bucket and came back.

The man started opening the lids of the wooden boxes placed on the terrace. At first, he opened those that were not nailed down.

“Here are the vegetables, as always. The meat — pretty good bacon. The eggs are also in here. The earlier you use them, the better. And a dozen jars of honey.”

After that he used a crowbar to open the boxes with nailed down lids. He showed its contents.

“Here are the gunpowder and the fuel — it’s more than usual since I thought that the weather might worsen . Please, take a look for yourself.”

"Yes. Thank you very much."

The man looked at the tripod placed on the ground. The persuader has been detached already.

"How was the new model of the fully automatic rapid-fire persuader?" the man asked the old woman as if in anticipation.

"It's not bad. I have not a single complaint concerning its performance. But the fact that there's no tripod for my physique is painful, that's all. It's a good one."

"If you say that… the engineers in my country will be happy," the man's face broadened into a smile.

"I've used it to cut down a tree not long ago," the woman said instantly. The man looked at the toppled tree.

"……. Um, I won't report that to the higher-ups," the man said with a glum face.

"When you're my age, calculating efficacy and laying explosives are troublesome."

"… If you need help in physical work, just call me. I'll gather some men and come."

"Alright, I'll do that in case of an emergency."

From the terrace, the man glanced at the girl, who was giving water and food to the horses. Then he asked the woman, "Well… I've asked it many times already, but don't you want to live in the country? The people will be happy to see you there."

"As I've said many times, I really appreciate their feelings, but I don't intend to move there. Besides, I'm not living alone now."

"Um, I'm just asking, but… what will happen to this child? Is she going to live here with the motorrad for the rest of her life?"

"That is her own choice. It's her own life. When she finds something that she wants to do, she'll do it. Though I want her to live here, it's not my call," the old woman said firmly.

The man, who has much greater physique, lowered his shoulders.

"Please call me again whenever it suits you…"

"Alright. I'll call you some time."

Then the man lifted the boxes by himself, and started transferring them to the house. He carried some of them in and carried out some from the house. After he loaded them on the carriage, he helped the woman to put away the tripod.

—

"Here you go."

The girl put a cup of tea on the table in front of the man.

The man was sitting on a chair in the living room, his coat removed. The old woman was sitting opposite him. The girl put her cup nearby and also sat at the table.

"Thank you. What a nice smell. What kind of tea is this ?" the man asked the girl.

"It is the apple tea you've delivered to us earlier," the girl said happily. She raised her mug with both hands and carried it to her mouth. The man lightly raised his cup and started drinking.

Time slowly passed. The man told the old woman the latest news about the country. After that, he made a note about the planned time of his next visit and the things he will bring.

"Well, I should get back before it gets dark.—— Thank you for the tea."

He stood up with his coat in his hand. The old woman and the girl were about to escort him outside the house when,

"——Uh, this is…"

The man stopped. In front of his eyes was the brown coat carefully hung from the wall. The girl stopped.

"I've seen a man wearing exactly the same coat not long ago. I think I saw it somewhere."

"……"

The girl held her breath. The old woman beside her asked the man:

"Oh! Who was this man?"

"He already returned home. In his country, this is the only durable coat that is suitable for traveling, so it seems that everyone uses it. So they always laugh when they meet someone outside the country and realize that they are fellow countrymen."

The man continued without noticing the girl staring at him.

"This country is not far from here. They are engaged in trading too."

"Where is it?!" The girl suddenly cried out in a loud voice.

"Wha—!"

"Where is it?! Where is this country?!"

"……"

The man gave a surprised look at the woman and the girl. The old woman didn't say a word.

"Please, tell me where this country is!" said the girl, as if clinging to the man.

—

"So, we are going to that country?" asked Hermes.

The girl instantly replied:

"Yes, I'm planning to, that's why I'm doing this."

The girl was refueling Hermes on the terrace. She was pouring fuel from a can through the spout. The day was coming to an end. The sky, almost completely covered with clouds, was dark.

"Hey! That's enough!" shouted Hermes.

"Ah…"

The girl hurriedly stopped tilting the fuel can. She placed it on the floor and firmly put a cap on Hermes' tank, which was fueled to the utmost.

"Are we really going?" asked Hermes.

—

A little bit earlier.

"I've said it already, this country is located nearby."

The gunpowder seller answered to the girl's importunate question. But Kino kept firing her questions in quick succession.

"Can I reach it by motorrad? Can I?"

"Eh? Yes, you can. I'm going there by carriage, but if it 's not a rainy season, the road isn't that bad… I guess…"

"How long will it take to arrive there?"

The man glanced at the old woman.

"Well… If you go by carriage, it will take two days. But it'll probably take only one day by motorrad. The straight road goes through the forest, so you don't need to worry about getting lost… Did I answer your question ?"

The girl nodded several times and replied:

"Yes… Thank you. Thank you very much…"

—

After seeing the gunpowder seller's carriage off:

"I see… I understand your feelings."

The woman was talking to the girl on the road.

"… I want to do this. I… want to do this. By all means. —— Will you allow me?"

The old woman nodded.

"Well, I won't stop you. Because it's your own life. But this will not necessary have a good outcome.—— This might end very bad."

Then the woman asked the girl:

"Do you really want to go there?"

"I'm going," the girl replied to Hermes.

"Then I'll try to be of help to you."

Saying this, the old woman came out of the house. Being called, Kino entered the house pushing Hermes. She placed him near the entrance, far from the lamp and the stove. The old woman came out of the room, carrying a big leather bag.

She put the bag on the floor and opened it. She took out a folded black jacket and black pants. Then she took out two belts for the jacket and for the pants, both made of thick material. There was also a hat with a brim and flaps that could cover the ears, and goggles with much more solid frame compared to ones they used for horse riding.

"Please, put these on. Your usual clothes probably aren't fit for traveling. I asked the gunpowder seller if he had some clothes that are suited for riding a motorrad and he brought these."

The girl raised her head.

"Master…"

"Actually, I wanted to give it to you as a present for your next birthday. But because *such* time has come—— Well, it's kind of early, but it's for you."

"……. A…" The girl opened her mouth and was about to thank her.

"Please, take this too."

With these words the old woman took a holster from a shelf on the wall. It was meant to be worn on the waist and it was pretty long. It contained the high caliber revolver that the girl used in training.

"Master, this is——"

"Yes. Tomorrow you should load it with bullets, perform maintenance and hang it on your belt, and then depart. This thing is important to keep you safe."

"But…"

"But what? I used it when I was young, so this persuader is very valuable, don't you think?"

The old woman smiled broadly. "Well, because it is really valuable—— Please, take a look."

The old woman took out a finely crafted pitch-black wooden box from the bag. She put it on the table, entered the key combination and opened it.

"Ah…"

"There's nothing to worry about. I'll lend 'one' of them ."

When they both peeped into the box, they saw three more revolvers that looked exactly the same, divided from each other with boards; six spare cylinders were also placed in there.

"You will also need this plus the bag to put your luggage into. You can place it on the carrier, I suppose. Please, take it with you."

The girl looked up at the woman's face.

"Master…"

"Yes?"

"Thank you very much. I don't know what to say…"

The old woman lightly placed her hands on the girl's shoulders.

"It's early to thank me. Besides, who knows how everything will turn out? Maybe you'll regret it, thinking, 'If that person hadn't save me back then, I wouldn't end up like this.'"

"……"

"Or maybe you won't. Everything depends on you. Kino, I don't regret that I saved you. And—— I wish you luck."

—

The next morning.

The clouds, hanging low in the sky, were floating far away. The rising sun wasn't visible, and it wasn't raining .

Hermes was standing on the terrace with his engine turned on. The leather bag was tied to the rear carrier. A spare fuel can was placed above it.

The girl was standing nearby.

She was wearing the black jacket, the black pants, and the thick belt strapped around her waist. Several pockets were attached to the belt; the holster with the high caliber revolver was hanging on her right thigh. Her long hair was tied back in a ponytail and was hidden under the

jacket. She was wearing a brimmed hat with flaps covering her ears; the goggles were hanging on her neck.

The old woman came out of the house and said something to the girl.

The girl nodded firmly and said:

"I'm off."

The girl put on the goggles. She straddled Hermes, removed the stand and slowly descended to the road.

She changed direction and set off.

—

A motorrad was driving on a single road through the forest.

This straight, plain and solid road seemed endless. The opening in the forest created by the road was stretching to the horizon; the sky there had a lead color.

"You're speeding too much!" said Hermes.

"Really?" the rider answered shortly.

"Yes. Even if you don't rush like that, we will still arrive in the afternoon."

"But, it's alright, I guess…"

"For now. But if the road becomes rough, it won't be good."

"I see…"

"Plus I'm tired. Reduce the cruising speed. What if we didn't arrive there because of your reckless behavior?"

"I understand…"

When she reduced the speed, Hermes breathed out.

"Kino," he addressed the rider, but didn't receive an answer.

"Kino."

"……"

"Hey!"

"Eh? —— Ah, yes. What?" The girl finally noticed Hermes' question and asked back.

"I've got a question. What are you planning to do when you arrive in that country? I haven't asked you about this essential point yet."

She was quiet for a while; the trees just kept moving in the opposite direction. It seemed that she and the motorrad stood still, while the scenery, which didn't change a bit, was moving.

The girl slowly spoke: "I am not 'Kino', after all…"

"Huh?"

"I think that I'm not 'Kino'. No, I think that 'I'm different'. That's why I'm going there… to his homeland …"

"And then?"

"I'll look for people who knew Kino, his family. I'll meet with them…"

"What will you do when you meet them?"

The girl slowly raised her head. She looked at the dark gray sky spread above her.

"I'll apologize," said the girl, turning her gaze back at the road.

"Wouldn't it be better to tell them what happened first ?"

"Yes, I'll tell them and then apologize…. That's why I' m going…"

"Well… It's off-topic, but don't you want to make a small break? You've been driving for quite some time, your arms and legs must be tired because of the vibrations."

"No, it's fine."

The motorrad was running through the forest.

The girl continued to drive without stopping until afternoon.

She stopped Hermes on the side of the road and had lunch.

She put some honey from a small pot on her bread and ate it without saying a word.

When she was about to drink water from a flask, Hermes told her:

"I guess you know that you should avoid drinking unboiled water."

The girl reluctantly made a fire using solid fuel, poured the water in a cup and drank.

She almost silently cleaned up, put on her hat and goggles and started driving on the very narrow road.

The forest, reflected in her goggles, was floating from the center to the sides. The motorrad continued moving on the straight road.

The girl lost the sense of time, as the sun was hidden behind the cloudy sky.

"It's alright. Even if you don't rush like this, we'll be in time for afternoon tea," said Hermes.

And then he urged her to look at the sky in the west. A small blue crack in the clouds in the west part of the sky was visible between the trees.

"The weather is getting better. Seems that we won't get wet."

The girl didn't answer. She just kept turning up the throttle with her right hand.

Soon the motorrad stopped in front of a wall standing in the middle of the forest.

"It's here. I'm sure," said Hermes.

The girl alighted the motorrad and slid down the goggles.

The walls of this country had the same color as the forest itself. Judging by the walls' curve, the country wasn't that big. The stone walls were covered all over with ivy, and at first sight it looked like moldering ruins.

The girl slowly removed her hat and goggles. She took out her hair from under the jacket and let it hang down her back. She looked at the towering walls in front of her and stood there petrified.

Suddenly she heard a sound of opening doors and lowered her sight in surprise.

A little further by the road was the gate. Two guards came out of the guard post. Both had old rifles on their backs — one was in his thirties, and the other one was quite young, around twenty.

"Uh, are you a traveler? Do you want to enter our country?"

"……"

"Yes," Hermes answered instead of the girl.

"…Um… Well…"

The guard looked strangely at the girl who was about to say something.

"Uh… Here is… Um…"

Then the girl dashed to the carrier. She lowered the bag and opened it before the guard made a surprised look. She took out a gently folded brown coat from the bag.

"This… probably belonged to someone from this country…"

She presented it with both hands to the guard.

The guard accepted it with suspicion.

"Can I look at it?"

The girl nodded. The older guard spread the coat and said: "Yes, this coat belongs to a person from our country . Let me see…"

He looked inside the inner pocket.

"Yes, there's still a resident number in here. 48402-15855, who might this be?—— I'll look this up."

The young guard repeated the number and went to the guard post near the country wall. After some time he came out holding a thick ledger.

"'48402-15855'. Yes, there's such number. This person left the country from this gate four years ago. His name is ——"

"Kino!" the girl shouted.

Both guards were startled when she said the name in such a loud voice.

"You're right… His name is 'Kino'."

They both looked at the girl. The older one asked her carefully, trying not to look too harsh: "If you don't mind , can you tell us where you got it?"

The girl didn't answer the question. She just said: " Does he have any family?—— If he has, I want to meet them! Please!"

"……"

"……"

The guards were surprised when they saw the tears flowing down the girl's face.

—

Dozens of country residents gathered on a small square at the inner side of the gate. It seemed like they were returning from work or from fields and, after hearing that a traveler came to the country, they lined up near the gate and talked about it.

"As if they don't have anything else to do."

The elder guard was stunned seeing so many people from the guardroom. The girl was sitting on a chair with the same stiffened expression on her face; the motorrad was standing beside her.

"We've contacted the family, so they'll come here soon , Well, at least can you tell me what happened?" said the guard.

The girl slightly shook her head.

—

It was afternoon. The number of clouds on the sky rapidly decreased. The blue color of the sky was getting deeper.

Soon a truck arrived at the square. This little truck with a platform attached to the back was used for work

in fields. From inside, a middle-aged woman and an old man came out. They pushed their way through the crowd and entered the guard house.

The woman gently spoke to the girl, who hurriedly rose up.

"I'm not Kino's family. But I was asked to come here and take you there."

"Where?"

"To his only blood relative —— to his mother. Will you come with me?"

The girl nodded. The guard asked the old man if it's alright.

"Huh, we won't bite," came the answer.

"So we want you to give her a permit to enter the country. This child is an invited guest."

They loaded Hermes onto the truck's platform and fastened him down.

"Hm, I'm wondering how it'll go," he mumbled, as if it has nothing to do with him.

The truck was running on an earthy road between the fields.

The girl was sitting silently in the passenger seat with the coat in her lap.

The truck stopped at a street where houses were standing close to each other. It was a log house, standing among the trees.

Everyone got out of the truck. The old man spoke to Hermes: "Would you mind staying here? It'll be troublesome to load and fasten you again."

"I'm not the one you should be addressing," said Hermes.

The old man agreed and asked the girl the same question.

"Come on, I'll be here. It's fine."

"If it's alright with you, Hermes, then so be it…," the girl said.

"Okay."

Leaving Hermes behind, the three people entered the house. They opened the door and found themselves in a room which was quite dim.

—

There was not a soul in the living room that they just entered. There was a table with two chairs and a brick fireplace that had no fire lighted.

"……"

The girl took off her hat, put her goggles in it and held it under the folded coat.

"We are here," the middle aged woman called out.

"Yes, I'm coming." A woman's voice came out from the inside.

"……"

The girl's left hand tightly grasped the coat.

Soon a single woman came out of the back room.

It was a slightly thick-set woman of 45-55 years old, wearing round-lens glasses. She was wearing an apron above a one-piece dress.

Seeing the girl, the woman addressed her with a smile. "Ah, it's you. I was told that you know something about my son. What a charming traveler."

"……. Yes."

"What is your name?"

"×××××."

"Welcome, ×××××."

The woman offered her a chair. After the girl sat down and placed the coat in her lap, she sat at the opposite side of the table.

"What should we do?" asked the old man.

"Please leave us alone. I'll have you take care of her later."

After that the two who brought the girl, left the house.

With the sound of the closing door, the room fell into silence. After some time, the girl spoke first.

"… Um,—— I'm returning this!"

She put the folded coat on the table.

The woman took it and slowly looked at the number on the inner pocket.

"There's no mistake. This belonged to my son, Kino. Where did you——"

"I'll tell you everything! I'll tell you!" the girl screamed and leaned forward.

"… I understand."

The woman nodded lightly and said to the girl:

"But first, please, wipe your tears."

—

While the girl was frantically explaining what happened, the clouds on the sky were blown away, exposing the setting sun. An evening glow lighted up the greenish brown rural country and the log house. The room was filled up with a mix of light red and orange.

—

"So, that was it," the woman said in gentle voice.

"I am sorry," the girl repeated four times.

"Thank you for letting me know.—— I almost gave up , since he didn't come back and I didn't receive any letters from him for a long time. When I heard about the coat, I thought that he probably passed away."

The woman said this indifferently, her voice lacking emotion.

"I am sorry…," the girl said quietly, still without removing her gaze off the table.

"There's no point in blaming yourself."

"Still… I'm sorry. If I haven't said such things to my family…"

"Then you won't be *you*, right?"

"Still… This random person, Kino, wouldn't be dead… if that day I hadn't said anything… and looked forward to my birthday quietly…"

"That child…," the woman said, then suddenly changed her tone. She started speaking lightly, as if chatting about ordinary things. "That child told me that he would like to travel. He said that it relates to his own growth and the growth of the country. He left the

country many times, then came back, then left again… Since he "became an adult", he rarely appeared in his own country."

"……"

"That's why, every time he left, I would be waiting for him, thinking, 'What if he doesn't come back?'"

"……"

"Please, tell me one thing."

The girl raised her face —half in tears and half with an almost dead expression— and replied quietly, "Yes?"

"Do you have a place to return to?"

"Eh?—— Yes. But…"

"That's good. That's really good. You must return there. But it's already too late, so please stay for a night in 'this country'.—— I'll make some tea."

She rose up from the chair, moved to the kitchen near the living room and sat there.

"Um…," the girl said as if remembering something, rising from the chair. She heard the woman's voice:

"It's alright. You don't need to help me. Stay where you are."

—

For some time only a noise of burning wood was heard. Then the sound of boiling water. The sound of pouring.

In the room, completely colored red,

"……"

The girl was touching the coat lying in front of her.

When she was about to put both hands on her knees,

"!"

She touched something cold with her right hand. She pulled back her hand in surprise. She slowly lowered her gaze and checked the thing she just touched.

It was the persuader inserted in the holster. A matted black piece of metal in the crimson air.

The girl slowly put her hand on her knee, avoiding it.

—

"Please."

She placed two steaming cups of tea on the table. The woman took the coat from the table and disappeared in the back room. When she came back, she moved a tea cup towards the girl and also took a seat.

The girl took the cup with both hands and sipped.

"Is it too hot?"

Making two more sips, the girl said that it was fine. Then one more sip.

“You seem really thirsty,” said the woman.

The girl almost instantly drank half of the cup. Then she slowly breathed out.

“It’s delicious,” said the girl.

The next moment she heard the woman saying, “ Thank you.”

“…Huh?”

The world in front of her eyes slowly tilted to the right.

—

There was a loud sound of a person striking the floor, followed by the sound of a chair falling down.

Still sitting on the chair, the girl lost balance and fell to the left along with the chair. She pushed away the tea cup with her right hand, spilling the tea on the table. The teacup tumbled down near her face with a dry sound. The girl's tied up hair scattered across the floor.

"Eh… Eh…?"

She looked at the wooden ceiling that seemed distorted to her, and let out a voice as if gasping for air.

In the red atmosphere, she saw the woman's head that seemed as if it was covering the ceiling. She saw the woman looking down at her and stretching her hands.

"Eh…?"

The hands, which seemed bent, stretched towards her throat.

"If it wasn't for you…"

She clearly heard the woman's voice. And then the feeling of cold hands at her throat.

"If it wasn't for you, my son wouldn't have died."

"!"

The hands squeezing her slim throat were full of strength.

"… Kh!"

She breathed out with difficulty and let out a short sound.

"If it wasn't for you, my son would've come back safely. Kino would've come back. Kino would've been alive. Am I wrong?"

"……"

The girl couldn't see the expression of the woman's face hovering above her. She just saw a black mass.

The evening sun was viciously dyeing red everything in the room through the window. The woman continued throttling the long-haired girl who was lying face up.

"Do you understand my pain? Do you understand the feelings of a mother whose son had died? Do you understand what it feels for a person who can do nothing except wait?"

"……"

"If it wasn't for you!"

She applied even more strength.

Neither breath nor voice leaked out of the girl's throat, her arms only moved up slightly and then fell down. Trying to grab something, she once again raised her shaking arm, but it fell down. That moment her right hand felt something cold. She held it tightly and drew her arm back moving only her shoulder. Removing the holster strap, the gleaming black cylinder and then the barrel appeared.

The woman was speaking slowly with her mouth opened wide.

"If it wasn't for you, Kino would've come back."

Then again.

"If it wasn't for you, Kino would've come back——Gh!"

The long barrel of the revolver was inserted in her mouth. The trembling from the girl's hand was transmitted to the barrel, so the woman's teeth started clicking.

The woman loosened her grip. The girl breathed in deeply and then groaned when she breathed out.

"Now… I am… I am Kino…"

The clicking sound stopped.

"I'm not going… to let someone kill me… again…"

Bang.

The crimson world. The wooden living room.

A person, who was leaning over another person on the floor, sprang up along with the sound of an explosion, as

if shocked with electricity. After that, without saying a word, she fell down on the second person lying on the floor.

—

The crimson world.

A dying person was leaning face-down over an unconscious person lying on her back.

The great amount of blood has soaked into that person ’s hair.

In the crimson world, something more reddish was spreading on the floor.

—

After some time, when the sun disappeared behind the forest and the country's wall, the room suddenly started falling into darkness.

"……"

Someone was peeking through the window near the entrance into the room that didn't show any signs of life.

—

The next morning.

Kino woke up at the crack of dawn.

She opened her eyes and slowly raised her body. Then she pushed aside the warm blanket. Kino looked down at herself and noticed that she was wearing clean white underwear.

"……"

"Good morning."

Upon hearing the sudden voice, she turned her gaze and saw Hermes, standing on his side stand.

"Ah, good morning, Hermes," replied Kino.

She looked to the left. The bed was standing next to the wooden wall; the weak light of the morning sun was coming into the room through the window on that wall.

She looked to the right. In the small room, there was only a simple table, a chair and a coat hanger. The washed and folded white shirt, boots, the holster with a persuader inside and the hat with goggles were lying on the table.

The black jacket and the pants were carefully hung on the coat hanger.

"——Where am I?" she asked in a stupefied voice.

The answer came from the outside of the room.

"You're still in this country. This is my house," replied a middle-aged woman as she opened the door. She was the one who met her yesterday.

"It's the morning of the second day since your arrival to our country.—— How do you feel? Any dizziness in your head or numbness in your legs or tongue?"

She asked this with the same gentle tone as the day before. Kino shook her head.

"That's good," said the woman.

"……"

For some time, Kino remained seated on the bed with a dazed look, her eyes wide open. She was breathing quietly and slightly moving her shoulders up and down.

"What about that person?" Kino asked shortly.

"The funeral and burial were held last night," answered the middle-aged woman and added, "I'll wait while you dress yourself." And then she left the room.

Kino got out of bed and looked at her clothes. There wasn't a single spot on the collar of her jacket.

She dressed herself like the previous day. She put on the black jacket, strapped the thick belt around her waist,

and slung the holster on her right thigh. There were only slight traces of a dry, black something left on the revolver , which was used to fire one bullet.

When she was going to put her hair under the jacket,

"……"

It was the first time she noticed it.

"You should probably look at the mirror, it is behind the coat hanger," said Hermes.

Kino quietly made three steps towards the mirror and stood before it. It reflected a person with a short hair.

"……"

Kino looked at this person for some time. Then the person in the mirror started moving her mouth.

"Kino… I am—— Kino."

"Hello, Kino."

The moment Hermes said this, the door opened. The two who met her yesterday entered the room — the old man and the middle-aged woman.

"Your hair was soaking with blood. Well, we thought that it might be wrong, but still this person has cut your hair.—— Do you mind?"

Kino moved her gaze from the mirror to the woman and answered with a short 'no.'

"Um, well. Please, take a seat," said the woman.

Kino sat on the bed, while the two brought chairs from the corner of the room and sat beside her.

"Well, where should we start?"

When the woman opened her mouth, Kino asked back: "What… what will be the punishment for what I've done …?"

"In our country, 'rightful self-defense' is not a crime. However, 'aiding a suicide' is quite a serious crime.

According to our laws, the punishment will be deportation from our country. —— Do you understand that?" the old man asked, and Kino nodded in return.

"I do, but… why?"

The woman slowly talk combined with twittering of the birds outside.

"There are many softhearted people in this country. —— But there are young people who don't like it, so they leave the country and travel. Well, it seems that they can't escape their nature after all."

"……"

"Let's get back to our conversation. This person had been waiting for a very long time, all alone. Do you understand the feeling of a mother who waited all the time for her son to come back home?"

"No," answered Kino.

"It's alright." The woman nodded and continued: "I think she realized that she doesn't have to wait anymore and sighed with relief. When she understood what happened to him, she became free from anxiety. ——

Well, yes, she gave you a tea that caused paralysis, but I'm sure she clearly understood how it would end when she started throttling a person who has a persuader."

"……"

"Do you get it?"

Kino shook her head. "No, I don't."

"Well, you may not understand. But it's alright. I just want you to understand one thing."

"What is it?"

"You don't have to cry about this anymore.—— It's over."

—

"We'll do the rest. You should return back to where you came from. I'll talk to the guard at the gate where you entered the country. You should take the direct road."

Pushing Hermes, Kino left the room. She found herself on the street under the light blue sky. The morning haze still quietly hung over the country.

Coming out to the street, Kino made a deep long breath.

"Please, take this, Miss Kino."

The middle-aged woman stretched her hands and presented her something.

"……"

It was a folded brown coat. It was the same coat that Kino brought.

The old man spoke to her.

"That person left it along with a note that says: 'Don't bury it with me, give it to her.' People say that a long time ago it was a present she gave to her son on his birthday. Now—— it's yours."

Kino silently put Hermes on the side stand, and received the coat from the woman.

She stretched the coat and put it on. Its hem almost touched the ground.

"It's quite long," said the old man.

"Uh-huh," said Kino.

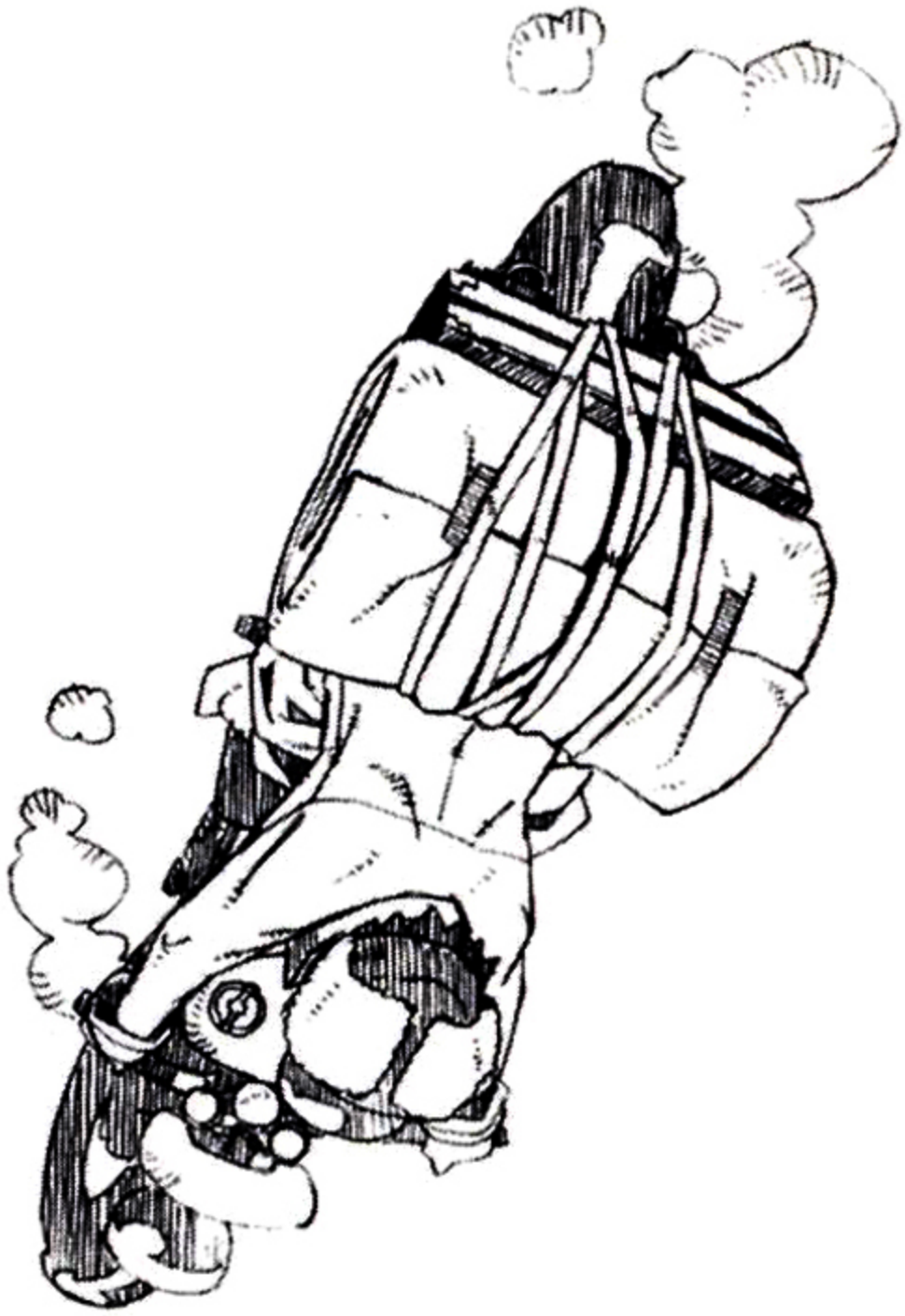
That day the guard sent the traveler off early in the morning.

That traveler was riding a motorrad and wearing a long coat with its hem wrapped up to her thighs.

After seeing off the motorrad disappearing in the woods, the guard gave a yawn, looked at the sky and returned to the guard post.

Above the green forest and the country walls.

The morning haze cleared and the blue sky spread as far as the eyes could see.



Translator's Notes

1. ↑ Volume 6 Chapter 4: A Land with an Elder —I Need You.—
2. ↑ Wire-guided missiles are guided projectiles directed using radio signals sent to it through electric wires connecting the missile to its guidance device.
3. ↑ No, it's not shocking, really. It won't sink in… at least not until you realize they were talking about *cute little babies* a while ago…. To preserve this little twist, all of the 'Marie' was replaced with 'you' in the exchanges between the King and the girl. In Japanese, it is not required to use the pronouns for ' you' and it's not strange to refer to a person by name, even if you're talking right in front of that person. In the Japanese version, it wouldn't be weird for the king to call Marie's name in every single sentence…, but in English, one would either think that the king's way of talking is weird, or notice that he wasn't talking to the girl at all, betraying this ending…
4. ↑ I'm not sure if this is the exact term in English, but basically, he was referring to people who steal things from a house on fire, or steal things rescued from a fire.

5. ↑ The country mentioned here is the one described in Volume 6 Chapter 8: For Luck — How Much Do I Pay For? —.
6. ↑ *Shiritori* is a Japanese word game in which the players take turns in saying words that begin with the final syllable of the previous word.
7. ↑ Just a conjecture, but this name might be a reference to an alternative name for the Greek god of the underworld, Hades, or to the City of Dis in the Inferno (The Divine Comedy), the sixth level of hell where 'heretics', among others, are punished.
8. ↑ I kept the Japanese word because I'm not sure. Literally this word means 'again' and alternatively, the dialogue would have been like: Student: "Ah—, again…? That sound is not from a phonograph. Again, you see. I felt it earlier too, you know." Master: "What do you mean by 'again'?" But this conversation doesn't sit right with me. So I treated *mata* as a term. I doubt it has any connection, but just FYI, *mata* is attached to the name of two monsters in Japanese folklore, the cat monster, *Nekomata* and the eight-headed serpent, *Yamata no Orochi*. In both cases, *mata* has the meaning 'forked'.
9. ↑ In Volume 1 of the spin-off, *Gakuen Kino*, there was a character referred to as Kino's "grandmother" , who, as all of you can guess, must be Master in her

old age. It was hinted there that this grandmother is afraid of ghosts. So this is where it came from… haha

10. ↑ Literally: "I like *'Boku wa Kino'* more than *'Watashi wa Kino'*. Don't you think that *'boku'* suits me better? "